

# Commission gets favorable reaction

By John Thavis  
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — Catholic and Jewish groups reacted favorably to the announcement that the Vatican and Israel had established a joint commission to study church-related problems in Israel and the occupied territories.

The commission was described by both sides as a prelude to diplomatic relations.

Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres has accepted in principal an invitation to visit the Vatican for discussions on diplomatic relations, an Israeli official said Aug. 3. No date for the visit has been set.

Avi Pazner, Israeli ambassador to Italy, called the formation of the commission an "historic decision."

"I'm convinced that we have opened a new page in the story of Vatican-Israeli relations, and I'm convinced that in the end we will have diplomatic relations. When that will be, I cannot tell you," Pazner told Catholic News Service July 30.

"This is the first official step toward a clear objective: the establishment of diplomatic relations," Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls said in announcing the commission initiative July 29.

The commission, which met in an inaugural session at the Vatican the same day, will limit its work to "bilateral" issues dealing with the church's situation and its institutions, Navarro-Valls said.

He said the commission was the result of recent Vatican-Israeli meetings in Jerusalem, which occurred in a "favorable" climate created by ongoing Arab-Israeli peace talks.

The Vatican spokesman refused to make public the commission's agenda. But it appeared that it would not discuss such questions as the rights of Palestinians and the status of Jerusalem — an issue that involves the Christian, Jewish and Muslim faiths. The Vatican has said those issues must be resolved before diplomatic relations can be established.

Navarro-Valls said the Vatican still

had "concerns and reservations" about these larger issues, but that it wanted to begin with specific bilateral questions regarding the activities of the Catholic Church in Israel and in the territories Israel has occupied since the 1967 war. Disagreement and confusion has occurred concerning the legal right of church institutions to operate, about protection of their property and, in particular, about their tax-exempt status.

The Latin-rite patriarchate of Jerusalem, headed by Patriarch Michel Sabbah, said in a statement that it welcomed the commission's formation. It said that in opening an official dialogue with Israel, the Vatican was remaining "true to its principles" and its past positions.

Patriarch Sabbah told Vatican Radio July 31 that the reaction so far among Palestinians had been "very calm, very quiet."

"We have not noted any negative reaction. I think people realize that the policy of the Holy See has always followed the same line, and nothing has changed," he said.

Rome Rabbi Elio Toaff, who once welcomed Pope John Paul II to the Rome synagogue, said the Vatican move was important from a political — not theological — point of view.

"The fact that the peace process received a push from (Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak) Rabin, and that the Arab states said they were therefore more open, placed the church in a difficult position: it risked remaining outside a mechanism that will decide the entire order of the Middle East," he told the Rome newspaper *La Repubblica* Aug. 1.

Pazner said Jerusalem's status would definitely not be on the com-



AP/Wide World Photos  
**TAX PROTEST — About 300 Palestinian merchants staged an anti-tax protest July 26 in East Jerusalem. They were the first Arabs given a permit to protest in more than four years.**

mission's agenda and said he could foresee no other place where the issue of Jerusalem would be discussed with the Vatican.

"There is no other body or another forum for holding talks between the Vatican and Israel. This is the only one," he said.

A top Vatican diplomat, however, said the Vatican still views Jerusalem's status as one of several problems in need of solution.

Archbishop Jean-Louis Tauran, assistant to the Vatican secretary of state, said the Vatican had not changed its basic position on these other issues.

Contributing to this story was Rochelle Saidel in Jerusalem.

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