

Mideast leaders want Vatican to be cautious

By Cindy Wooden
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — Jerusalem's Christian and Muslim leaders have written a letter of support for Vatican policies in the Middle East, but have also asked that caution be exercised in the new Vatican-Israeli talks.

Latin-rite Patriarch Michel Sabbah of Jerusalem told Vatican Radio Aug. 11 that the most important thing about the letter to Pope John Paul II was that it showed "the trust that the Muslim showed in the Holy See."

The letter was published Aug. 9 by an Arab newspaper in East Jerusalem. The text was not released by the Vatican or Patriarch Sabbah's office.

News agencies in Jerusalem reported that the letter asked the pope to make sure great caution was exercised in the talks to protect the status of Jerusalem as a holy city for Muslims, Christians and Jews.

The establishment of a joint Vatican-Israeli commission to address "bilateral" issues affecting church operations in Israel and the Israeli-occupied territories was announced in late July.

Making the announcement, Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls said the talks would focus on practical church problems, but that did not

mean it had abandoned its concerns for Palestinian rights and for a special status for Jerusalem.

The August letter about the talks was signed by Patriarch Sabbah; Saad Al-din Alami, the mufti of Jerusalem; Muhammad Hussein, the imam of Al-Aqsa Mosque; Anglican Bishop Samir Kafiti; and Melkite Archbishop Loutfi Laham.

The patriarch told Vatican Radio the letter "was a gesture of dialogue, of ecumenism, between Christians and Muslims to express appreciation for all that the Holy See has done in favor of peace in this region and to draw attention to the need that the population has for the support of the Holy See."

When asked whether some Arabs were concerned about the Vatican-Israeli talks, the patriarch said concern exists "in the sense that they always rely on the support of the Holy See, on the objective and human understanding of the problem that the Holy See has always shown."

He said the basic position of the Vatican "will never change because it always is a question of defending justice, promoting justice, which works in the favor of all sides in the conflict."

The patriarch welcomed the establishment of the joint commission "because there are many problems to



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RABIN PROTEST — Members of the group Kahane Chai hold signs Aug. 10 at a police barricade near the Bush compound at Kennebunkport, Maine. The group was protesting new Israeli Prime Minister Yitzak Rabin's position on returning Israel's occupied territory to the Palestinians. During the protest, Rabin was meeting inside the compound with President George Bush.

resolve and the means to resolve them is to dialogue, to talk."

Patriarch Sabbah also said that a new phase in relations between Israelis and Palestinians is being born with the policies of newly elected Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

"It is the first time in the history of this conflict that serious steps toward peace are being taken," he said. The

patriarch added that there is new hope, but there also are many dangers.

The first is the fear "that dialogue is not sincere, that it won't change the situation.... For more than 40 years we have had many declarations without any change. So, it is time for those who talk to give proof that there is a new reality, that peace will be born."

ABA members deciding whether to fight or switch

SAN FRANCISCO (CNS) — Attorneys who opposed the American Bar Association's endorsement of abortion rights are considering whether to drop out of the organization, form a new group or keep up their fight for neutrality on political and moral issues.

On Aug. 11 the ABA approved a resolution opposing state and federal restrictions on abortion. The 276-168 vote by the bar association's House of Delegates affirmed a 659-340 vote taken the previous day among the general membership attending the annual convention in San Francisco.

In 1990 the ABA rejected a similar effort to endorse a right to abortion in favor of an official stance of neutrality.

Catholic attorneys from around the country have been calling Mark Chopko, general counsel at the U.S. Catholic Conference, for advice about whether to remain involved in the ABA.

Chopko, who is due to take over as chairman of an ABA committee on religious organizations, said he is thinking long and hard about the best response to the abortion resolution.

His involvement with the legal organization has been generally rewarding, Chopko said, and the personal and professional consequences of dropping out would be substantial.

For many attorneys, the ABA provides a means of obtaining insurance, retirement plans and medical care. Dropping out would be both a strong statement of opposition and a personal financial hardship some attorneys might not be able to handle, according to Chopko.

On the other hand, Chopko said he is unhappy with the fact that a portion of his dues money will be used to work for the legal abortion, particularly when much of his life's work is devoted to stopping abortion.

Chopko said many lawyers he knows, including some on his own staff, have decided to quit the ABA in protest.

Paul Interdonato, attorney for the

Archdiocese of Washington, said he and his three partners have already resigned from the ABA, and that he has urged his peers among diocesan lawyers to do the same.

"I can see why some people would want to stay and work for change from within," Interdonato said. "But I've had my belly full of this."

Kevin Todd, a member of the Pro-Bar Committee for Abortion Neutrality, said he and many of his fellow attorneys who opposed the resolution have yet to decide what step to take next.

Before the vote, hundreds of lawyers who support neutrality told him they would drop out of the ABA if the abortion resolution passed, he said. When the House of Delegates adopted the abortion resolution in 1990, more than 1,500 lawyers resigned in protest.

Todd attributed the overwhelming vote of the membership in part to unfavorable treatment by the rules and calendar committee, which controlled discussion of the issue, and to the San Francisco convention site, where local attorneys organized no opposition to the resolution.

"I was surprised at the lack of committedness from area attorneys," Todd said. "There was a total vacuum of leadership."

At the ABA's 1990 convention in Chicago, area lawyers rallied to support neutrality. Todd, a staff attorney for the Chicago-based Americans United for Life, said lawyers in the Midwest were better able to attend that convention and better represented the opinions "of the heartland."

The latest resolution clears the way for the ABA to lobby about abortion legislation, to take part as advocates in court cases on abortion, and testify in Congress in support of legal abortion.

Todd said the sentiment he heard from opponents of the resolution was: "I'm not going to pay them several hundred dollars a year to be involved in something I disagree with."

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