

Pope welcomes peace accord

Israeli, PLO agreement is only first step, he says

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — Pope John Paul II and other church officials welcomed a breakthrough accord between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization as the first step toward lasting peace in the region.

The pope asked those who remain "doubtful" about the historic agreement to give peace a chance to take root.

"It is the beginning of a difficult path, along which there will certainly be problems: This is the price of peace between peoples and also the price of peace among hearts," the pope said at an Angelus blessing Sept. 12 at his summer villa south of Rome.

On Sept. 9, Israel and the PLO agreed to end decades of hostility and recognize each other, paving the way for limited Palestinian self-rule in the Israeli-occupied Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

"We thank the Lord for having inspired courageous leaders to overcome mistrust, fear and serious objective problems, and to begin — finally — a concrete and constructive process for the good of their peoples and the region," the pope said.

Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navar-

ro-Valls called the signing of the accord Sept. 13 a "courageous and necessary act."

"The Holy See is aware of the present and future difficulties. But it is also convinced that this signing is the opening that will allow progress on the road to the desired goal of peace," he said.

Archbishop John R. Roach, chairman of the U.S. bishops' International Policy Committee, said the bishops "applaud the courage, the imagination and the spirit of compromise that has been shown in negotiating this major advance toward peace in the Holy Land."

"We look forward to further steps to build on this progress and to ensure greater peace and justice in the region, extending autonomy to all Palestinians of the West Bank, to a final agreement with commitment to Israel's survival and security and a true homeland for Palestinians," Archbishop Roach said.

Latin-rite Patriarch Michel Sabbah of Jerusalem said the new agreement represents the birth of "a new era and a new hope" in a land torn by conflict. For peace to take hold, leaders on both sides must now educate their people away from violence toward a "total conversion of hearts," he said in an interview Sept. 10.

The patriarch said he was convinced that despite some opposition by groups of Israelis and Palestinians, the agreement would ultimately be accepted without new violence.

While the agreement does not touch upon the thorny question of Jerusalem, the patriarch said: "We have to be patient. Not everything could be solved together." But he predicted that given the current climate of good will, even this will be resolved.

Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston said the accord was a "cause for rejoicing on the part of all men and women who value peace."

"We can only applaud the courage of the Israeli government and the leadership of the PLO in taking this historic step," he said.

The Rev. Joan Campbell, general secretary of the National Council of Churches, called the pact a culmination of efforts by Palestinians, Israelis and others working for peace, as well as a "beginning of a new era of relationships between Israel and the Palestinian people."

In a Sept. 10 commentary, Vatican Radio said, "The miracle continues."

"The enemies of yesterday, Israelis and Palestinians, are making a fundamental gesture together: ceasing to believe that their own life postulates the elimination of the other, accepting that the other exists and recognizing the reasons for it," said the editorial by the radio's director, Jesuit Father Pasquale Borgomeo.

It noted that there are still many obstacles to a complete settlement, but suggested that peace will be "contagious." Already people can see that peace brings with it new human, economic and political advantages for the region, the commentary said.

The Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, said the agreement was "a great step forward on a road that should lead toward peace."

"This ray of hope carries with it enough strength and fascination to signal the beginning of a new epoch — and not only for the tormented reality of the Middle East," said a commentary by one of the newspaper's editors, Angelo Scelzo.

The commentary cautioned that a "long and difficult" process of negotiation still lies ahead, but said this first concrete achievement was an "exceptional" event.

Other Vatican sources unanimously described the PLO-Israeli mutual rec-



AP/Wide World Photos
A Palestinian woman holds a poster of Yasser Arafat during a Sept. 4 rally supporting the PLO leader at a Kalandia refugee camp in the Israeli-occupied West Bank. Arafat has secured an interim agreement with Israel for limited Palestinian self-rule.

ognition agreement as a crucial and positive step. They said that by improving overall peace prospects, it could also favor the work of the Vatican-Israeli commission that is studying bilateral problems with a view toward diplomatic relations.

"Any accord that facilitates peace facilitates these other agreements," said one Vatican official, who asked not to be named.

Another Vatican source emphasized that the Holy See "wants the negotiations to continue in order to resolve all the existing problems. This is an important point."

A Vatican diplomat said: "This accord is an interesting, useful and positive step forward. There is no doubt about that. But other steps must still be taken — even if this represents a very important breaking of the ice."

He noted, for example, that the entire question of Jerusalem has been left to later negotiations. Israel's control over the city has never been accepted by Palestinians. The religious aspects of the status of Jerusalem have been a main Vatican concern over the years.

Israel's liaison to the Vatican at the Israeli Embassy in Rome, Miriam Ziv, said she hoped the PLO-Israeli accord would indirectly help accelerate the work of the Vatican-Israeli commission, of which she is a member.

"The talks with the Vatican have never had anything to do with the Palestinian issue or with other issues of the Middle East. They were strictly bilateral issues we were negotiating," she said Sept. 10.

Contributing to this story was Barb Frazee in Washington.

Pontiff left mark on Baltics

Offers teachings in first-ever visit

By Agostino Bono
Catholic News Service

TALLINN, Estonia — Pope John Paul II's first visit to the former Soviet Union was a wide-ranging teaching mission in places where the church was shackled for decades.

Taking advantage of the new intellectual freedom, the pope went to former Marxist academic centers and preached Catholic social doctrine as the wave of the future.

On windy, often rain-drenched fields, he praised Catholic perseverance under persecution and said this strong faith must be an important ingredient in the region's future.

His speeches also ranged across some of the major social and economic challenges facing the newly freed republics.

Noting the persecution of all Christian churches under communism, the pope said that the shared suffering should stimulate ecumenism and joint efforts in rebuilding society.

The Sept. 4-10 papal trip was to the Baltic countries of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. All were part of the Soviet Union for 50 years.

Throughout the weeklong visit, the pope stressed the need to look ahead. The task now is to find the strength to create new societies, he said.

The pope summarized his overall message Sept. 10 as he left Riga, Latvia, for the Estonian capital of Tallinn.

"It serves little purpose to limit oneself to perpetuating the memories of a time when darkness fell," he said at the Riga airport farewell ceremony. "The hour of material and moral reconstruction" is at hand.

"What is good is not always comfortable," he said. "Its practice requires courage, generosity, even renunciation."

Earlier in the trip, the pope said that

"it is not difficult to see the hand of God" in the fall of Soviet communism. But he urged that forgiveness and reconciliation rather than revenge should be the attitude toward the former communist masters.

The pope prayed that the Baltic countries would undergo a peaceful transition to a new society and that a smooth transformation would help unite Eastern and Western Europe.

A peaceful change requires unselfish economic aid from the West and peaceful relations with Russia, the pope said.

Russia, the biggest and most powerful nation emerging from the ex-Soviet Union, is involved in a series of political and economic disputes with the tiny Baltic countries.

"We want to enter into a period of respect toward each other, the big toward the small. All must be respected," Pope John Paul said, speaking spontaneously at the end of the Sept. 10 afternoon Mass in Tallinn.

Earlier, the pope warned Baltic leaders to be prudent in their acceptance of capitalism and democracy.

Despite their strong points, the two systems are filled with defects which have caused moral, political and social havoc, he said.

In Riga, he urged academics to turn their "scholarly curiosity" to Catholic social thought as the criteria for judging capitalism.

"Catholic social doctrine is not a surrogate for capitalism," he said Sept. 9.

"Mardism's kernel of truth" was its insights into the defects of the capitalist system, he added.

But he said the purpose of church thought "is not to draw up a system but to indicate the impassible limits" of economics and politics.

The church is not critical of the "market economy" in itself, but "has always distanced herself from capitalist ideology, holding it responsible for grave social injustices," Pope John Paul said.

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