

Catholics, Jews praise Vatican-Israeli accord

By Cindy Wooden
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — The Vatican-Israeli movement toward full diplomatic relations builds on and gives new energy to three decades of improved relations between Catholics and Jews, leaders of both communities said.

The promise of normalized relations between the Vatican and Israel in 1994 was sealed with the Dec. 30 signing of a landmark "fundamental agreement" drafted by a commission of Vatican and Israeli officials during 17 months of intense negotiations.

The agreement was signed in Jerusalem by Monsignor Claudio Celli, an undersecretary of state at the Vatican, and Yossi Beilin, Israel's deputy foreign minister.

It outlines general principles of religious freedom in civil society and includes a strong condemnation of anti-Semitism.

"The agreement pulls the rug out from under the feet of those anti-Semites who try to provoke hatred through religion," said Rabbi Israel Meir Lau, the chief rabbi of Israel.

Baltimore Archbishop William H. Keeler, president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and U.S. Catholic Conference, said the agreement provided "a major step forward in the dialogue of reconciliation between the Roman Catholic Church and the Jewish people emphasized by the Second Vatican Council."

Rabbis Leon Klenicki, director of in-

terfaith affairs for the Anti-Defamation League in New York, and David Rosen, director of interfaith affairs for the ADL in Israel, expressed hope that the accord would "strengthen the special Catholic-Jewish relationship" and "promote good will among the peoples of the Middle East."

Pope John Paul II and the Israeli government were expected to name personal diplomatic envoys within days, with the naming of full ambassadors expected within four months of the Israeli parliament's ratification of the agreement.

Joaquin Navarro-Valls, Vatican spokesman, said the new Vatican nunciature would be based at a Franciscan monastery near Jaffa, located on the outskirts of Tel Aviv.

Vatican and Israeli sources have said that if conditions are right, Pope John Paul could follow up the diplomatic developments with a trip to Jerusalem during the coming year or two.

The agreement does not mention the city of Jerusalem, but Navarro-Valls said the Vatican still maintains its position that the city's sacred character must be protected by internationally guaranteed rules.

The Vatican will continue to insist that "whoever exercises sovereignty over the city, alone or with others, must adhere to an internationally guaranteed special statute" protecting Jewish, Christian and Muslim holy sites.

Beilin, the Israeli official, said the document "has much to do with the relationship between the Jewish religion and the Catholic faith. It is an important

change after 45 years of the existence of Israel and, perhaps, 2,000 years of separation between us and the Christians."

The "fundamental agreement" does not solve all the thorny church-state problems in Israel and Israeli-controlled territories, but it lays the groundwork for further negotiations. It specifies that subcommissions will be named to deal with delicate issues regarding the church's property holdings, and its legal and tax status.

The agreement affirms the church's basic right to own property and to run schools, welfare institutions and communications media. It also declares respect for the traditional rules regulating activity at the Christian holy places and states a joint interest in promoting Christian pilgrimages.

Israeli and Jewish leaders hailed the agreement as a milestone, largely because it meets the longstanding Israeli request for diplomatic ties. Experts on both sides predicted it would have a positive effect on Jewish-Catholic dialogue.

The preamble of the "fundamental agreement," citing the historic process of reconciliation between Catholics and Jews, says the accord should offer a sound and lasting basis for improvement in Vatican-Israeli relations.

Cardinal John J. O'Connor of New York, moderator of Catholic-Jewish relations for the U.S. bishops, said although the document is preliminary "we are convinced that it will bring rich rewards."

Beilin said the accord might pave the way for a Vatican role in the Middle East peace process.

Church spokesmen deny priests help in rebellion

By Mike Tangeman
Catholic News Service

MEXICO CITY — Spokesmen for the Diocese of San Cristobal de las Casas in Mexico's southern Chiapas state denied that priests were aiding guerrillas in a rebellion against the government.

More than 60 people, including 35 soldiers and police officers, were killed when the guerrillas, mostly Mexican Indians with some nonindigenous and mixed-blood leaders, raided and occupied four major towns on New Year's Day.

Mexican and British radio news reports Jan. 3 said at least 1,500 armed guerrillas were retreating into more remote villages, cutting telephone lines and burning bridges behind them in order to make pursuit by the army difficult.

A Jan. 1 statement from the Chiapas

state government said that "some liberation-theology Catholic priests and their deacons have joined these groups and are aiding them through the San Cristobal diocesan radio-communications system."

The guerrillas had actually captured and were broadcasting via the state-owned XEOCH radio station in Ocosingo, not the diocesan station.

Father Rodolfo Izal, San Cristobal diocesan spokesman, said the rumors were part of a campaign designed to discredit the diocese.

He and Father Gonzalo Ituarte, diocesan chancellor, denied that the church was involved with the Zapatistas, as the guerrillas were known.

The accusations are "entirely false," said Father Izal.

"There are absurd and slanderous

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Playing with fire



AP/Wide World Photos

Children's game echoes real clash

Palestinian schoolchildren play around a burning tire they set ablaze in Gaza City, in the occupied Gaza Strip on Dec. 21, 1993. The children's games mimic everyday clashes between the Palestinian and Israeli forces.

people out there who are blaming the (Dominican) fathers and the diocese and the bishop for this situation," Father Ituarte added.

Televisa, the Mexican television network, broadcast on its international news program that Dominican Father Pablo Romo, president of the diocesan Fray Bartolome de las Casas Human Rights Center, was serving as one of the commanders of the guerrilla movement.

However, Catholic News Service located Father Romo in Mexico City at the offices of the church-linked National Center for Social Communications. He was staying in Mexico City at the Dominican provincial residence.

Father Ituarte said that in San Cristobal early on the morning of Jan. 2, the guerrillas abandoned the government buildings they had held just one block from the downtown cathedral and the offices of Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia.

Later, Father Ituarte told CNS, there was a "heavy confrontation" between guerrillas and army troops over control of the state penitentiary.

In Ocosingo, where the Dominican order is in charge of diocesan pastoral work, heavy gunfire erupted in the background Jan. 2 as a priest at the Dominican residence nervously told CNS by telephone that army reinforcements and guerrilla troops were engaged in "heavy combat" just four blocks away.

"It seems they're fighting for control of the outskirts," said the priest, who identified himself only as Father Pablo

before hanging up as more gunfire broke out.

The following morning, Father Pablo told CNS that Mexican army troops were still trying to regain control of Ocosingo.

He said the Dominicans were confined to their residence, and it was "very dangerous" to be out in the street because of cross-fire.

Following initial gun battles, guerrilla leaders issued a formal statement called the "Lacandon Jungle Declaration." The manifesto includes a "declaration of war" against the Mexican army, which leaders said was propping up a one-party state headed by a "dictator," Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari.

In a speech from the balcony of the San Cristobal Municipal Palace on New Year's Day, a rebel leader identifying himself as "Comandante Marcos" said the uprising was timed to coincide with the Jan. 1 enactment of the North American Free Trade Agreement. He said the trade pact among Mexico, Canada and the United States was a virtual "death sentence" for Mexico's indigenous cultures.

The Zapatistas takes their name from Emiliano Zapata, who during Mexico's 1910-1917 Revolution led impoverished southern Mexican Indians and farmers in their fight for "land and liberty."

Father Ituarte said the guerrilla uprising appears to be the result of exasperation over years of exploitation and discrimination against the indigenous population in Chiapas by a wealthy minority of landowners.