

WORLD & NATION

Catholic leaders lament passing of King Hussein

By Judith Sudilovsky
Catholic News Service

JERUSALEM — Mideast Catholic leaders were among those praising Jordan's King Hussein and attending his funeral in the capital, Amman.

"King Hussein was a very good Muslim but at the same time he was very open to the Christians," said Msgr. Dominique Rezeau, charge d'affaires for the Holy See in Amman. "Not only was he always good to the church, he also had a good understanding of what Catholicism is. He was a very religious man, a real believer and a champion of peace."

Catholics in Jordan said special prayers for their dead monarch at services Feb. 7, said Msgr. Rezeau, who attended the king's Feb. 8 funeral. Latin Patriarch Michel Sabbah and Bishop Selim Sayegh, the representative of the Latin Patriarchate in Amman, also attended the funeral.

Hussein, who had cancer, returned to Amman in critical condition from the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota Feb. 4. He never regained consciousness and died Feb. 7.

In Israel and the West Bank, Israelis and Palestinians also mourned for the king, who went from being an enemy to a partner and a leading force in the peace process.

Father Ibrahim Hijazin, a native of Jordan and parish priest of the West Bank city of Ramallah, said many of his Palestinian parishioners expressed their condolences to him at the death of his king. "King Hussein was a great man of

peace for the Middle East. He kept the balance," said Father Hijazin. "With his loss there will be a big and deep change in the Middle East."

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called Hussein "a courageous leader, a loyal friend, a maker of peace with Israel."

"The government and people of Israel bow their heads in grief over the passing of King Hussein," said Netanyahu. "King Hussein was one of the few leaders who was recognized even in his lifetime as a historic figure. He will be remembered as the creator of modern Jordan, as a major architect of peace in the Middle East. He will always be remembered as one of the giants of the second half of the 20th century."

Hussein won the hearts of many Israelis two years ago when he paid personal condolences to the families of seven young girls who were gunned down on a school field trip by a Jordanian soldier. At the king's death, Israelis called him "our hero."

The king also managed to repair the deep rift created between him and the Palestinians after the September 1970 operation that became known as "Black September," when a civil war erupted between Palestinian guerrilla organizations and the Jordanian army. Hussein banished the Palestinian units from Jordan, and they were forced to set up bases in Lebanon.

Hussein gained back the confidence of the Palestinians during the first Gulf War when he supported Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, whom the Palestinians sup-



Reuters/CNS

A Jordanian boy holds a portrait of the late King Hussein as the coffin is carried through the streets of Amman on the way to the funeral service Feb. 8. Tens of thousands of Jordanians filled the streets to honor their king.

port. Some 80 percent of Jordan's residents are Palestinian.

Bethlehem Mayor Hanna Nasser said the king's death was a "big loss" to the Palestinians.

"He really proved his good will and played a very important and remarkable role in the peace process," said Nasser. "He was a man of peace and said he was looking for the day when there could be Palestinian independence. For us it is a very big loss, as he has passed away while we are still in the middle of the peace process with Israel."

In a Feb. 8 telegram, Pope John Paul II urged Jordan's King Abdullah to continue his father's legacy of "unflinching com-

mitment to the quest for stability and lasting peace throughout the Middle East."

"This is a legacy which must live on, for no greater tribute can be paid to the king than the pursuit of this task which was so dear to him," the pope said in the telegram. "I pray, therefore, that you will be granted strength and wisdom as you seek to lead your country and its people toward that peace and harmony for which your father toiled so courageously."

The pope sent his condolences to the royal family and the people of Jordan.

"Commending King Hussein to the all-merciful God, I invoke upon your majesty and the Jordanian nation abundant divine blessings," the telegram added.

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