

WORLD & NATION

Pope expresses hopes for Middle East peace, visit

By Lynne Weil
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — In back-to-back meetings with Palestinian and international authorities, Pope John Paul II voiced the Vatican's continued support for peace in the Middle East and his enduring personal wish to visit the Holy Land.

The pope made his remarks Feb. 19 during separate audiences with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and delegates from a Rome-based U.N. meeting on year 2000 events in Bethlehem.

Arafat, visiting the Vatican for the seventh time, reiterated his previous invitation for a papal visit, adding, "There will be a big celebration."

Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls said Pope John Paul responded, "Yes, I hope to be there." The pontiff has often expressed a wish to visit the region, his spokesman said, and has always agreed to Arafat's invitations.

The pope and the Palestinian leader conducted "an exchange of news about the current situation in the Middle East, in particular about the prospects for evolution in the negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians," Navarro-Valls said, "with special attention to the city of Jerusalem."

Jerusalem, which Israel declared its capital in 1980, is home to ancient places holy to Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Palestinian authorities say the capital of a future Palestinian state should be in East

Jerusalem.

The Holy See supports an internationally guaranteed statute concerning Jerusalem in light of its religious importance to people of many countries and religions.

Arafat told journalists the day before he visited Pope John Paul that Jerusalem was capable of containing two capitals.

"Just as both the capital of the Italian state and that of the Vatican are in Rome, so Jerusalem can contain two capitals, with no barrier or wall."

But during the pope and Arafat's 15-minute discussion at the Vatican, "the subject did not come up," Navarro-Valls said.

As the Palestinian leader moved on to see the Vatican secretary of state, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, the pope spoke to a delegation of eight participants in the Feb. 18-19 Bethlehem 2000 International Conference, sponsored by the United Nations and held at the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization. The delegation represented about 700 people who attended the Rome conference, one of a series of multinational meetings in Europe meant to raise money and other support for a planned 18 months of year-2000 commemorations in Bethlehem, from Christmas 1999 to Easter 2001.

Pope John Paul told the delegation that the jubilee year "invites us to look forward in hope to a world in which peace will be secure."

"We must all work for a future in which there will be no threat to peace from



Reuters/CNS

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat meets with Pope John Paul II at the Vatican Feb. 19. It was Arafat's seventh visit to the Vatican. He reiterated his previous invitation to the pope for a pastoral visit to the Holy Land.

among the worshippers of the one God, from any who bear the name of Christian or Jew or Muslim," the pope said. "In particular, we must be confident that it is possible to build peace in the Middle East."

Speaking for the Holy See Feb. 18 at the U.N. conference was Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, president of the Vatican's jubilee year planning committee.

"Everywhere in the world, the year 2000 is becoming like a neon light under which are being carried out the most profane, the most spectacular and the most commercial of projects," the cardinal said. "But if there is a city which can legitimately claim an authentic celebration of the year 2000, it is indeed Bethlehem, which owes its brilliance to Christmas. There is no more perfect harmony between space and time, between a place and a date, than Bethlehem and 2000."

Latin-rite Patriarch Michel Sabbah of Jerusalem, who in his speech discussed the Bethlehem celebrations as an opportunity for reconciliation, told Catholic News Service that periodic travel restrictions enforced by Israeli troops still hamper pilgrims and residents traveling between Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

The patriarch said the U.N. gathering would "attract the attention of the world to Bethlehem ... to the mystery of the Incarnation, but also to the people who live today in Bethlehem and who suffer."

In a Feb. 19 interview with Vatican Radio, the patriarch said Palestinians were

hoping for a change of leadership in Israel after elections scheduled for May.

"The Palestinian people think and hope that there will be a new government, which will have a new vision capable of embracing all the needs of Israeli security along with all the needs for Palestinian freedom," he said. "With this broad vision, one can hope to reach peace. Otherwise, if the vision is unilateral — that is, attentive only to the question of security for Israel — there will not be peace."

Arafat told the conference that "from Bethlehem ... we shall send a call ... for the dedication of all efforts and resources for building and development instead of violence, occupation and conflict."

The Palestinian leader said Bethlehem "is in a race with time in order to erase the traces of Israeli occupation."

He also said he wanted to express to "all Christian forces in the world our deep thanks ... for helping us make our efforts successful."

The state of Israel sent no representative to the meeting.

Smokers urged to combat AIDS

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — The Vatican has called on people around the world to give up smoking for a day and donate the equivalent money to the fight against AIDS.

The proposal by the Pontifical Council for Pastoral Assistance to Health Care Workers was designed as a penitential preparation for the year 2000. At the same time, it aimed to offer concrete assistance to people with AIDS and increased awareness about the health risks of smoking, said a February statement sent to bishops and posted on the council's Internet site.

The council asked local church leaders to "invite all Christians and all people of good will" to give up tobacco products for a day and to give what they would have spent in smoking to the fight against AIDS.

The funds could be allocated to local Catholic hospitals or to other health care organizations that sponsor programs to fight AIDS or assist the disease's victims — the sick, their relatives, widowers, widows and orphans, it said.

A main benefit of this initiative would be to draw attention to the damage smoking causes to the health of tobacco users and those around them, the council said. It cited World Health Organization statistics showing that 3.5 million people die each year because of smoking, a figure which is expected to triple over the next 30 years.

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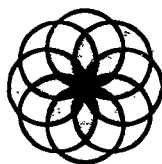
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