

WORLD & NATION

Pope

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"May peace be God's gift to the land he chose as his own," the pope said at the rainy airport welcoming ceremony.

Pope John Paul told Israeli President Ezer Weizman, Prime Minister Ehud Barak and other officials at the airport that although he traveled as head of the Roman Catholic Church, his visit was also a private pilgrimage that began in late February at the Vatican and in Egypt and continued the day before in Jordan.

"Along every step of the way I am moved by a vivid sense of God, who has gone before us and leads us on, who wants us to honor him in spirit and in truth, to acknowledge the differences between us, but also to recognize in every human being the image and likeness of the one creator of heaven and earth," he said.

The pope and Weizman spoke of rapid changes and improvements in Catholic-Jewish relations, especially over the past 20 years, paving the way for the visit.

Pope John Paul, who repeatedly used the phrase "the state of Israel" in his airport speech, said "many things have changed" since Pope Paul VI visited the Holy Land in 1964. Pope John Paul specif-



Arturo Mari/CNS

Pope John Paul II waters an olive tree, a symbol of peace, planted on the occasion of his visit to Mount Nebo March 20 in Jordan. Tradition says Moses first glimpsed the Promised Land from the mountain.

ically cited the launching of diplomatic relations with Israel in 1994 as "a seal on our efforts to open an era of dialogue."

For many Jews, the exchange of ambassadors between Israel and the Vatican was a long-awaited sign that the Vatican recognized Israel's existence as a state.

Relations on a religious level have improved as well, the pope said.

"With new-found openness toward one another, Christians and Jews together must make courageous efforts to remove all forms of prejudice," he said. "We must strive always and everywhere to present the true face of the Jews and of Judaism, as likewise of Christians and of Christianity, and this at every level of attitude, teaching and communication."

Weizman, welcoming the pope, traced the history of the Jewish people and of their return to the Holy Land and proclamation of statehood in 1948.

"During the years of exile, we suffered religious persecution and anti-Semitism, and a third of our people were exterminated, incinerated in the terrible Holocaust," Weizman said.

The president thanked the pope for "condemning anti-Semitism by labeling it as a sin against God and humanity" and for his March 12 request for forgiveness "for deeds carried out in the past by representatives of the church against the Jewish people."

With the Vatican continuing to insist on the special character of the city of Jerusalem and on the need for internationally guaranteed access to holy sites by all believers, Weizman encouraged the pope to see for himself how Israel governs the city.

"From its inception, the state of Israel has guaranteed freedom of religion and freedom of access to holy sites to all peoples, and you will certainly see the evidence of this, your Holiness, throughout your visit in Israel," the president said.

"You are arriving this evening in Jerusalem, the city of peace, the capital of the state of Israel, the heart of the Jewish world, which is also a holy site for Christianity and Islam," he said.

The president called Jerusalem "the city of eternity, a city that has been reunified" by Israel in its 1967 war with Jordan.

The city, he said, is "the capital and source of pride of the state of Israel."

Just before the pope arrived, the director of the Anti-Defamation League in Israel told reporters the papal visit would be an educational opportunity for Israeli Jews.

Pope John Paul II is a "different pope" than Jews are accustomed to historically, said Rabbi David Rosen, the ADL director.

Jews who do not live in predominantly Christian countries might not realize how much has changed in relations between the Vatican and the Jewish people, he said.

"What we need from the Christian world is a lot of tolerance, love and patience so the wounds of our boxed ears can heal," he said, referring to the historical animosity between Judaism and Christianity.

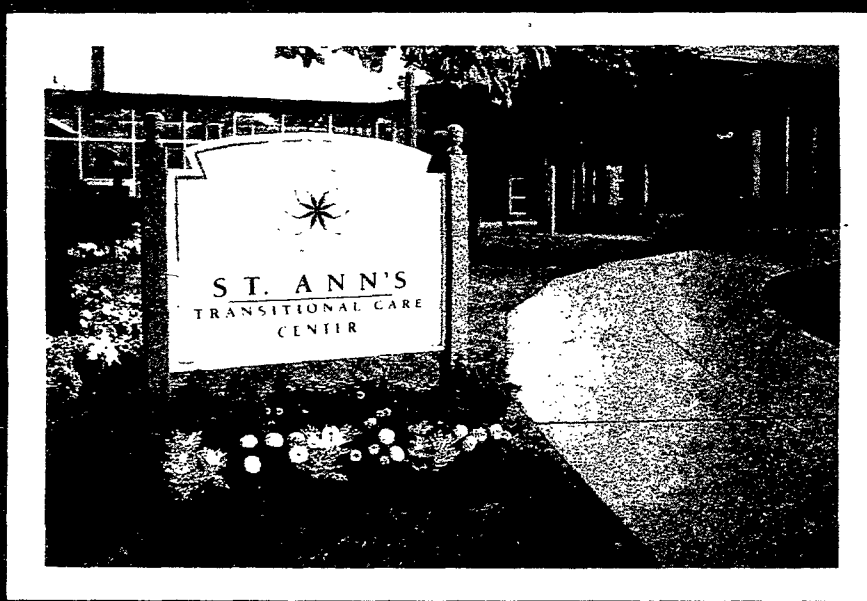
The pope's visit, he said, is a "personification, substantiation, witness and recognition of the relationship of the Jewish people and their ancestral homeland."

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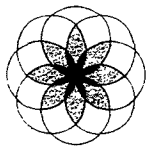
Contributing to this story was Judith Sudilousky.

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