

# WORLD & NATION

## Vatican demands respect, safety of holy places

By John Thavis  
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — The worsening Israeli-Palestinian conflict has penetrated to the place where Jesus was born, prompting an intense round of Vatican diplomacy and an appeal for worldwide prayers from Pope John Paul II.

A week after some 200 Palestinians — some of them heavily armed — took refuge in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, West Bank, Israeli soldiers increased the pressure for their surrender, firing at the monastic complex and leaving one person dead April 8.

The Vatican expressed "extreme apprehension" at the developments and said holy places like the Church of the Nativity were guaranteed protection by tradition and treaties.

Approximately 40 Franciscan priests and nuns waited inside, vowing to stay and pleading against an Israeli assault on the church. Church officials in the Holy Land were meanwhile trying to arrange an Israeli withdrawal that would allow the Palestinian gunmen to leave.

Pope John Paul, who was closely following the news in the Holy Land, called for a worldwide day of prayer for peace in the Middle East April 7, Divine Mercy Sunday.

Speaking that day at his noon blessing at the Vatican, the pope said only prayer could help people overcome "hatred and the thirst for vengeance" and take up the road of dialogue.

"How can we forget that Israelis and Palestinians, following the example of Abraham, believe in the one God?" he said. Without referring to the details of the standoff in Bethlehem, he said the basilica was in his "constant prayers."

When he announced his prayer day initiative, the pope warned that the events in the Holy Land seemed to be drifting toward "inhuman cruelty."



Reuters/CNS

An Israeli soldier stops Christian leaders, including Latin Patriarch Michel Sabbah of Jerusalem (fourth from right), from visiting the Church of the Nativity in the West Bank town of Bethlehem April 8.

The papal plea came as Vatican diplomats met with Israeli, Palestinian, U.S. and Arab League representatives, urging an immediate cease-fire and an end to Palestinian suicide bombings.

In the discussions, the Vatican criticized the "injustice and humiliation imposed on the Palestinian people" and the wave of reprisals that only "increase the sense of frustration and hatred," said Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls.

U.S. Ambassador Jim Nicholson was given a diplomatic note conveying the pope's hope that President George W. Bush would use his influence to convince Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to halt the reprisals. The Vatican also sought U.S. support for international monitors or peacekeepers in the region.

Navarro-Valls said Vatican officials made five key points in each meeting:

- "The unequivocal condemnation of terrorism, from whatever side it comes."
- Israel said its military operations were designed to uproot terrorists, who have carried out a series of deadly suicide bombings against Israeli civilians.
- "Criticism of the conditions of injustice and humiliation imposed on the Palestinian people, as well as for the reprisals and retaliations, which do nothing but increase the sense of frustration and hatred."
- The need for Palestinians and Israelis to respect the resolutions of the United Nations aimed at bringing a cease-fire, promoting Palestinian statehood and guaranteeing the security of Israel.
- The need to ensure "proportionality

in the use of legitimate means of defense."  
• "The obligation the conflicting sides have to safeguard the holy places, which are very important for the three monotheistic religions and for the patrimony of all humanity."

At a special session of the U.N. Commission on Human Rights in Geneva April 5, Archbishop Diarmuid Martin explained the Vatican's position and urged international action to stop the cycle of "terror and reprisal."

In Bethlehem, the tense situation at the Church of the Nativity worsened as food and water supplies dwindled and after Israeli forces blew open a door of the church, according to Franciscans inside.

The Franciscans said that early April 8, shelling by Israelis caused a fire to break out in the monastic complex, and that a 23-year-old monastic worker, Khaled Syam, was shot dead while trying to put out the fire.

Israeli soldiers said they were fired upon first by gunmen inside the church complex; that was denied by those inside.

The Vatican responded by issuing a statement insisting on respect for the "status quo" of holy places — a term that refers to the centuries-old tradition of inviolability of such sites.

It noted that respect for the holy places was included in accords between the Vatican and Israel and the Vatican and the Palestinian Authority.

Father David Jaeger, a spokesman for the Franciscans, who are in charge of the holy sites in the Holy Land, reacted strongly to the Israeli shelling of the complex.

"We are in absolute shock. ... We condemn this barbaric act," said Father Jaeger, an Israeli citizen who in 1993 helped negotiate a Vatican-Israeli agreement that paved the way for diplomatic relations. He urged international action to stop further military moves against the church complex.

## Allegations in priestly abuse scandal continue to emerge

By Jerry Filteau  
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — Los Angeles Cardinal Roger M. Mahony April 5 categorically denied a psychologically disturbed woman's claim that he molested her 32 years ago when she was in high school.

He urged law enforcement and church authorities to investigate the claims thoroughly and quickly.

The woman's allegation against one of the country's highest-ranked Catholic leaders marked a new turn in a growing church scandal over clergy sexual abuse in which new developments occur almost daily.

Cardinal Mahony, 66, has headed the Los Angeles Archdiocese since 1985.

Flora Mae Hickman, 51, of Fresno, Calif., approached a Fresno priest in late March claiming that she was molested by then-Msgr. Mahony in 1970, when she was a student at San Joaquin Memorial Catholic High School.

The Associated Press, which interviewed her April 6, said she "offered no details of what she claims Mahony actually did." It reported that she said she was knocked unconscious in a fight with students at school and awoke to find the bot-



Cardinal Mahony

tom portion of her clothing removed and Msgr. Mahony standing over her.

AP added, "Hickman also said she is taking medication for depression and has been told by a psychiatrist that she is a paranoid schizophrenic." It added that she "could not remember details" of the alleged event but insisted that "the charges are true."

Journalists learned of the allegation when several confidential e-mails from Cardinal Mahony's office were leaked to media April 5. In one leaked e-mail he reportedly spoke of his willingness to be interviewed by Fresno police and said he would not need an attorney because he had no recollection of the woman in question. He reported the allegation to the Los Angeles police the day he received it.

The leaked e-mails themselves became a news story over the next few days, with the archdiocese calling them stolen privileged communications and unsuccessfully seeking court action to prevent further dissemination after a local radio station be-

gan broadcasting their contents.

Other recent developments in the widening sexual abuse scandal:

• Father Roman Ferraro, 67, a Brooklyn, N.Y., diocesan priest suspended since 1988, was arraigned in a Massachusetts court April 8 on charges of rape and indecent assault on a child under 14 between 1973 and 1980. Prosecutors say the statute of limitations has not run out because the crimes took place in Massachusetts but the priest did not live there. Statutory limits on prosecution usually stop for any period of time that the perpetrator is not living in the jurisdiction of the crime.

• Father Daniel M. Azzarone Jr., 50, was indicted April 5 in Providence County, R.I., on six counts of first-degree sexual assault and one second-degree count for alleged assaults on two children in 2000 and 2001. He has been suspended from priestly ministry since his arrest last November.

• A Cleveland diocesan priest, Father Don A. Rooney, committed suicide April 4 after failing to show up for an appointment with diocesan officials to discuss an allegation that he had sexually abused a minor more than 20 years ago. Another Cleveland priest was removed from a parish over similar allegations and a for-

mer diocesan social services lay employee was arrested for molesting teenagers.

• In Detroit, a warrant was issued April 5 for the arrest of Father Felicien Komlan-Dem Houndjame on charges of first- and second-degree criminal sexual conduct for the alleged rape of a woman when he was working at Assumption Grotto Parish last year. A political refugee from Togo who had served from 1996 to 1998 in the Diocese of St. Augustine, Fla., Father Houndjame has been under treatment in St. Louis since January. Michigan prosecutors were reluctant to pursue charges until the archdiocese learned that similar complaints had led to his removal from the St. Augustine Diocese.

• Bishop William K. Weigand of Sacramento, Calif., announced April 5 that 14 priests of that diocese have been accused of sexual misconduct with minors over the past 30 years. Of those, he said, two are dead; two are retired and banned from ministry; seven have left the priesthood or fled the jurisdiction; and three remain in active ministry because "the allegations were not sustainable." He said three others were removed from ministry that day because of concern about patterns of behavior, but not because of allegations of sexual misconduct.

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