

WORLD & NATION

Church siege ends; calls for peace renewed

JERUSALEM (CNS) — As West Bank Christians cleared the debris left behind from the Church of the Nativity standoff, religious leaders made renewed calls for peace in the Holy Land.

The first Mass since the standoff's April 2 beginning was celebrated in St. Catherine Church — inside the Nativity compound — May 12 by Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, the papal envoy who was rebuffed in an attempt to celebrate Mass there during a diplomatic mission in early May.

Pope John Paul II, speaking at a noon blessing at the Vatican the same day, offered thanks to all those who helped make sure that "this holy place was given back its true religious identity."

He expressed particular appreciation to the communities of Franciscan friars and nuns and Greek Orthodox and Armenian Orthodox monks who "with notable sacrifices remained faithful custodians of the sanctuary." He also encouraged the people of Bethlehem again to take up the road of faith and hope in God.

Franciscan Father David Jaeger, spokesman for the Franciscans in the Holy Land, said after the siege and occupation of the Church of the Nativity ended May 10 that "this surreal and absurd ordeal" needed to be carefully reconstructed.

Father Jaeger said the standoff could have been resolved quickly if both parties had not rejected an earlier proposal similar to the final agreement. The spokesman said that, while he was not willing to lay blame for the standoff, he believed that both sides could have done things differently and prevented such a long and bitter situation.

Responding to a series of suicide bombings, Israel invaded the West Bank, and on April 2 about 200 Palestinians — including armed gunmen — entered the Church of the Nativity. The Israeli army said Palestinian gunmen on its most-wanted list were among those inside the church, which it surrounded with tanks. The army cut phone lines and food supplies, although some food did get through.

On May 10, the last of the armed Palestinians left the basilica. Under the terms of a deal worked out in painstaking negotiations, 13 gunmen flew to Cyprus and were expected to take up residence in European



Debbie Hill/CNS

On May 12, Mass was celebrated for the first time in some 40 days at the Church of St. Catherine, which adjoins the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. The Palestinian-Israeli standoff there ended on May 10.

countries; 26 other gunmen were released to the Gaza Strip, and 73 Palestinian policemen and civilians were allowed to go home.

The Israeli army withdrew from the area shortly after the Palestinians left.

The Vatican's diplomatic representative to Israel and the Palestinian territories, Archbishop Pietro Sambi, told Vatican Radio that the negotiating process that ended the standoff was "a symbol of the path to follow to reach peace between the Israelis and Palestinians."

The two peoples, he said, cannot continue to see each other only as threats, but must recognize they must find a way to live together.

The archbishop said that, with the siege and occupation over, "there must begin the no-less-important work of restoring faith, restoring dignity, restoring hope for the future in these two peoples."

A Franciscan friar who was inside the church compound during the standoff said the most difficult moment occurred when armed Palestinian gunmen entered the

church.

"We found ourselves between two forces, the Palestinians on the inside and the Israeli military on the outside," said Father Nicolas Marques, master of clerics of the Franciscans.

Father Marques said the Palestinians brought at least 40 guns inside the church. He said there were moments of extreme tension when the Palestinians waited for a possible Israeli attack.

"But I must say that the Palestinians respected us and never were violent toward us or disrespectful," he said.

It took an army of volunteers a few hours to clean the mess left behind in the church compound.

Members of each of the three Christian denominations cleaned their own section of the Church of the Nativity with kerosene and sawdust. In addition to the garbage left behind by the 200 Palestinians who sought refuge in the church, the Franciscan parish hall and three rooms of the Greek Orthodox convent had been blackened and charred — apparently by fires set off by Israeli mortars or flares. Inside the parish hall, brand new organ pipes were a mass of twisted and melted metal.

Bullet casings left from Palestinian guns were strewn on top of the parish hall and were gathered up as souvenirs, and Arabic graffiti was scrawled on the stairs leading to the hall. In a colored marker, the Palestinians had written the name of the first of their number to die, as well as slogans such as "I am ready to face the occupier."

"It was miserable in here," said 19-year-old Jalil Musalem, who came to help clean the Franciscan section of the church. "I can't begin to describe it."

As the Israeli-Palestinian standoff drew to a close, Latin Patriarch Michel Sabbah said violence will end in the Holy Land once Israel ends its occupation of Palestinian territories. The patriarch said Israel's concerns over its security caused the occupation of Palestinian territories, which provoked Palestinian resistance.

"To go on speaking about Palestinian terrorism without seeing the right of the Palestinians to their freedom and to end the occupation is condemning oneself not to see reality and to remain impotent in reaching a solution," he said in a May 9 statement.

Officials cut projections for youth day

TORONTO (CNS) — The World Youth Day 2002 national director said he hopes for 350,000 registered delegates for the gathering in Toronto July 23-28.

By May 5, more than 172,000 people from 165 countries had registered, said Basilian Father Thomas Rosica, World Youth Day national director.

The United States had the largest delegation, with more than 46,000, followed by Canada at nearly 29,000. Italy had more than 12,000 registrants.

Initial projections estimated 750,000 participants.

Ottawa archdiocesan officials also have downgraded predictions for the Days in the Diocese — a period of prayer, service and learning about the local church — which precedes World Youth Day. Some 25,000 young people originally were expected to participate in the Ottawa Archdiocese; now some 5,000 are expected.

Organizers cite fears of traveling following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in the United States and the high cost of travel from other continents to Canada as a reason for the dropoff.

Father Rosica said he believes the events surrounding World Youth Day would inspire a new Pentecost for the church in Canada.

"World Youth Day is truly a Catholic, Pentecost experience because it is Catholic and universal. To be Catholic is to be universal and open to the world," he said.

The throngs of young people who participated in past World Youth Day festivities echo the experience of the early church, when crowds streamed into Jerusalem to hear Jesus speak, Father Rosica said.

"These young people are happy. Their goodness, authenticity and joy could not help but inspire and attract others to the Christian way of life," he said.

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