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Editor: Athanasius MACORA, ofm

The Siege of Bethlehem comes to an end

Message of the Minister General OFM

Alleluia!

An agreement that guarantees an end to the long occupation and siege of the Nativity complex has been reached in Bethlehem, just when our Brothers of the Orthodox Church are celebrating Easter.

It is a sigh of relief for the whole Christian world, especially for our Orthodox Brothers, both Greek and Armenian, for our Little Sisters of the Sacred Heart and our confreres of our Order who had offered themselves as guarantors of safety against the threat of a possible massacre. The entire Franciscan family expresses its gratitude to the women and men of goodwill who were committed and commit themselves to peace.

We are conscious that it is a matter of only a stage along the path of reconciliation and agreement that will be long and difficult. Regret remains for the suffering, the wounds, the dead that could have been saved if only the solutions put forward a month ago had been accepted.

If every voice had been listened to!

Often it is thought to solve problems with the logic of force and power: even in this case, when only collaboration and the will to dialogue have brought about this glimmer of light that could lead to a global plan for a stable peace.

Let us never renounce a just and dignified peace for all We are all involved, we must all think so, we are all responsible for the building up of a more hospitable and human world. Each one of us can do something to impede both the terrorist blind hate, contrary to all reason and religion, and the structures that engender destructive violence, usurpation and vendettas.

Silence and indifference, especially in the area of the media of communication, can become a grave obstacle to the path of peace.

We Franciscans, who for many centuries, faithful to the command of the Church, are the custodians of the Holy Places, the treasure of the whole of Christianity, ask every woman and man of good will:

- to help us heal the wounds opened by this conflict between two peoples that possess and must live together in the same land

- to help us to rebuild a culture of co-habitation, of not being ashamed of this period "of history, which is ours, of being present without being able to prevent this tragedy"

- to help us to hope still in a peace that is possible, founded on justice and pardon.

Finally, our heart opens in gratitude for all the voices and gestures of solidarity - and they were many - that reached us from all parts of the world, from individuals and from communities.

Thanks especially to Pope John Paul II, who intervened forcibly on many occasions in favour of the besieged in the Nativity and for peace in the Holy Land.

Thanks to all the politicians, to the diplomats, to all the religious leaders that have made contact during these days and have listened to our appeal.

Thanks to the journalists from the various continents who have offered us their interest and their collaboration in the face of the tragic situation in which we found ourselves. May the Lord help you to persevere in building peace without betraying your mission to the truth.

May the sacrifice of life and the suffering of so many innocent persons of every people, religion and nation receive the gift of a true and durable peace in those places tortured by wars and violence.

*Br. Giacomo Bini, ofm
Minister General
Franciscan News - 12 May 2002*

Message of the Custos of Holy Land *Br. Battistelli*

The history of the testimony that the Church has tried to give to God Our Saviour in the places that served as the theatre of Redemption has been long and troubled.

But the occupation-siege of the Sanctuary of the Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ in Bethlehem constitutes a chapter without precedence. A lot has already been said and written, and there surely will be more, about the offences suffered by this most holy corner of the Land sanctified by the presence of the Word Incarnate. But the memory that we will always preserve in our hearts is, first of all, the heroism of the religious men and women who resisted during that real and true "lent".

Their "martyrdom" edifies and encourages us. We hope, in particular, that it will be possible for the testimony that these hoped to give to the superiority of love, pardon or even of simple humanity over the vindictive hatred that, too often, animates the forces in conflict in our region, to be seen.

The Custody of the Holy Land, together with the Minister General and the entire Order of Friars Minor, gives thanks to the Almighty and Merciful God for the end to this long suffering brought about without further blood shed. And it renews its proposal of fidelity to the mandate, entrusted to it by the Holy Father and the Universal Church, to guard and animate the holy places of the Redemption in order that its message is ever brighter and more widely listened to by the men of our time.

Franciscan News - 12 May 2002

Note from the Custody of the Holy Land Why did we remain in the Sanctuary?

1. Our Franciscan Friars and the Little Sisters lived in their own convents and, as they had nothing to fear from either the Palestinians or from the Israelis because of the respect they always had towards the two peoples, they remained at their post.

2. It was our duty to be faithful custodians - by mandate of the Holy See - of this HOLY PLACE, dear to all Christians, respected by the whole world and protected by international laws.

3. The dignity of the human person, irrespective of his belief and culture or membership of any race or nation, is dear to us. We would always have remained and acted in the same way, no matter who was inside or outside.

4. The sacrifices made by the Religious were painful, but were small in comparison to what would have happened in the Basilica of the Nativity if the clash had only been military. Our presence - we believe - will make the judgement of history on what is happening in Bethlehem less severe.

5. Our aim and desire was to find a diplomatic solution and we are happy to have in some way contributed towards that. We are thankful to all those who worked to bring it about.

Franciscan News -12 May 2002

A Definitive Solution to the Occupation-Siege of the Nativity in Bethlehem

The news of the definitive resolution of the occupation-siege of the Sanctuary of the Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ in Bethlehem is received with satisfaction and relief. This does not remove the disappointment at the delay, completely unnecessary and therefore unjustifiable, in the solution of the serious problem. Indeed, as the agreement reached in the end clearly shows, everything is possible and every counter-position can be overcome with good will.

It is this conviction, supported by the facts, that leads us to hope that the agreement permitting the unlocking of the untenable situation that took place in the Nativity will not be an isolated case, but the first sign of peace in the Holy Land.

It is certain that the unfailing duty in the face of history will require the complete and accurate reconstruction of what happened and of the respective responsibilities and at least the repair of the damages caused to the Sanctuary and religious houses.

From the very beginning of this crisis at least one conclusion was unavoidable: the need to intensify even more the efforts to carry out an efficient international juridical protection of the Holy Places that the Catholic Church has been demanding in the international courts for some time.

The thanks of the Friars Minor goes, first of all, as well as to Divine Providence itself, to the Holy Father JOHN PAUL II, who has been so close to our Fraternity during the long agony, and to the other Pastors of the Church who have tried to support us. Our thanks also go to the Statesmen that have followed the drama of Bethlehem and of the religious with great attention and availability. It is pleasant in a special way to praise the role of the operators of the media of social communications. It is to their credit that they focused the spot light of public opinion on the intolerable situation in which the Holy Place and the religious personnel attached to it found themselves and to have thus contributed, very significantly, to inducing the parties to a peaceful solution.

Franciscan News - 12 May 2002

Bethlehem: thanks, atonement and reconciliation

Bethlehem, 11th May 2002

The 39th day since the beginning of the event of the nativity in Bethlehem was lived in joy and rejoicing by the religious communities that guard the Holy Place.

The square was crammed with people this morning - men, women, children, Catholics, Orthodox, Armenians and Muslims - and all were willing to do all in their power to clean up and restore dignity to the place opposite the Basilica of the Birth of the Child Jesus.

A prayer meeting of praise and thanksgiving for the liberation of the Religious and of the Holy Place of the Nativity was held in Manger Square at 10.30 (local time).

The communities of Franciscans and Little Sisters of the Sacred Heart met the Minister General of the Order of Friars Minor, Br. Giacomo Bini, and the Custos of the Holy Land, Br. Battistelli, in the afternoon. The successor of St. Francis wished to express the thanks of the whole Franciscan Order to the Friars and Sisters of Bethlehem for their fidelity to the "mandate from the Pope". The Friars and Sisters - despite their fatigue - have requested permission to remain at their post from the Custos and Minister General.

The whole Franciscan Community of the Holy Land will receive Card. Etchegaray, the envoy of the Pope, in Bethlehem. The Cardinal will preside at the Mass of thanksgiving, atonement and reconciliation in the basilica of St. Catherine, close to the Nativity, at 11 o'clock. Msgr. Pietro Sambì, the Pontifical Representative, Msgr. Sabbah, the Patriarch of the Latin Church in Jerusalem, Br. Giacomo Bini, Minister General OFM, Br. Giovanni Battistelli, Custos of the Holy Land, will take part in the celebration. Card. Etchegaray will impart the Blessing of the Holy Father, JOHN PAUL II, at the end.

"NON NOBIS DOMINE SED NOMINI TUO DA GLORIAM"

Franciscan News - 12 May 2002

Jerusalem Patriarch condemns terror in capital

The Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem, Irineos I, in an unusual step, sent a letter over the weekend to President Moshe Katsav condemning the terrorist attacks which have recently taken place in Jerusalem. Irineos emphasized in his letter the high number of children killed and that the attacks don't differentiate between Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

"I, Patriarch of Jerusalem, Irineos I, call for the leaders of all faiths to unite in full and clear condemnation of the terrible act, and ask them to work together to prevent more such appalling acts in the future," he wrote. The letter was written in Hebrew. Israel has not officially recognized the appointment of Irineos as Patriarch.

The Jerusalem Post - 26 June 2002

Peres: Let Palestinians work in Israel

The defense establishment supports the idea of allowing Palestinians who have been given a thorough security check to enter Israel to work, Foreign Minister Shimon Peres told the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee yesterday.

He warned that the Palestinians are on the verge of an economic catastrophe, adding that their savings have run out.

MK Avraham Shochat (Labor) asked Peres why the government had approved the import of another 6,000 foreign agricultural workers from Thailand, if that is the case.

Peres answered that he is concerned about the economic situation in the Palestinian Authority and there must be a solution, including allowing Palestinians to work in Israel. He noted that Shin Bet head Avi Dichter and IDF officials believe that several tens of thousands of Palestinians, especially those from Gaza, could be given approval to work in Israel after undergoing "proper inspection."

Peres also said he is opposed to the idea of elections being held now in the PA, because elections would be accompanied by a rise in extremism.

As for reforms in the PA, Peres said all organizations that do not accept the rule of the PA must be disarmed, referring to such groups as Hamas and Islamic Jihad. He said there would be no chance for peace as long as these groups are armed.

Peres referred to the PA as the "Palestinian autonomy" at least twice during the meeting.

On the diplomatic front, Peres said the character, topics, and terms of reference of an international Middle East peace conference have not yet been formulated. However, he said there are two principles that are acceptable to all parties: land for peace and the establishment of a Palestinian state.

Peres said he is also trying to "reduce Arab expectations" for the Clinton peace plan. Instead, he said he favors a peace platform that would be more acceptable to Israel. He said he hopes to create a track that will be acceptable by both Right and Left in Israel that will not be rejected outright by the Palestinians.

Labor MK Haim Ramon attacked Peres for being a partner in a government whose "agenda is to re-conquer the territories. He said Peres should make a "unilateral move."

Meretz and opposition leader MK Yossi Sarid said that if the international peace conference does not result in establishing an international mandate over the territories, it would be a failure. He said the mandate should conclude with the establishment of a Palestinian state within two years.

Peres responded to Ramon and Sarid's ideas by saying they cannot be implemented and are good only for talk until elections. He also said there is no majority in the Knesset for an international mandate or dismantling settlements.

Moreover, he said the US is hesitating to mediate and would not take on a mandate, since it does not want another Korea or Vietnam.

If an international decision is made for a mandate, it would be only through the United Nations, and Peres said he does not support this.

*By Nina Gilbert
The Jerusalem Post - 28 May 2002*

UNDP/PAPP Press Statement

The United Nations Development Programme/Programme of Assistance to the Palestinian People (UNDP/PAPP) is deeply concerned about the recent escalation in the conflict in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory. The imposition of curfews and the reoccupation of Palestinian towns and villages in the West Bank has paralysed the lives of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, wreaked havoc on many essential services and institutions, and caused serious devastation to the economic and institutional infrastructure.

Although the extent of damages to the municipal and the institutional infrastructure cannot yet be accurately estimated, the early indicators show that the damage amounts to many hundreds of millions of dollars. Roads have been demolished; buildings shelled, including schools and almost all Palestinian Authority offices; homes bulldozed; electricity and telephone poles knocked down and water supply systems destroyed.

With this as a backdrop, UNDP/PAPP has drawn up an emergency relief and recovery plan. Mr. Mark Malloch Brown, Administrator of UNDP, authorized \$1.5 million on 5 April 2002, which has been utilized to purchase and distribute urgently needed medical relief supplies and to begin immediate infrastructure repairs in the municipalities. "I am deeply concerned about the increasing level of violence and the

devastating loss of life that has occurred on both sides over the course of the past few weeks," said Mr. Malloch Brown who has visited the area twice. "We hope that this assistance will help to reduce the suffering of civilians who are under a 24-hour curfew in some cases without access to food, water, electricity or medical aid."

In addition, with \$400,000 from the Islamic Development Bank, UNDP/PAPP has purchased and distributed food, baby milk, bedding, medical kits and essential household items for those who have been most severely affected by curfews and house demolitions, particularly in Nablus and Jenin.

Since the beginning of the Intifada in September 2000, UNDP/PAPP has provided \$35 million through its Emergency Response Programme to deal with the increasingly pressing needs - especially emergency employment generation - of Palestinians.

For the current and even more urgently needed recovery and rehabilitation efforts, UNDP/PAPP is seeking additional funding, and has already received indications of support or pledges from Canada, Germany, Italy, Japan, Luxembourg and the United States, amounting to approximately \$40 million. UNDP/PAPP will utilize new contributions for immediate infrastructure repairs such as opening up roads, repairing water supply systems, providing temporary shelters for homeless families and restoring damaged buildings. In addition, the repair and restoration to damage incurred to ministries, municipalities, educational facilities, clinics and other public institutions will be given a high priority, as the premises of many essential PA institutions were partially or wholly destroyed.

Currently, a comprehensive and coordinated needs assessment, donor-led and conducted by the World Bank, UN agencies, donors, local authorities and aid organizations, is under way. Donor-led teams are compiling damage inventories on a geographical basis, with sectoral needs prioritised by local communities. UNDP/PAPP led the assessment team to Qalqilya on 22 April 2002, and organized the assessment of Nablus under the auspices of the Government of Japan, on 23 April 2002.

Until this can be completed in the coming few days, emergency operation rooms have been put in place to collect information on humanitarian requirements, including medical supplies, shelter, food and repairs to water networks and electrical systems. The system, initiated by UNDP/PAPP, consists of "hot lines," which channel emergency requests to donors who have the resources to provide immediate assistance. PA agencies serve as focal points for each sector of the clearinghouse system and priorities are identified by local communities. Many national United Nations Volunteers have been assigned to staff the operations rooms.

The staff of UNDP/PAPP is also participating in humanitarian convoys organized by UNRWA. Over the past few weeks, convoys have successfully delivered basic supplies such as blood, medicines, oxygen, milk, flour, sugar, tents, and blankets to the cities of Jenin, Ramallah, Al-Bireh, Nablus, Bethlehem, Beit Jala and Hebron. Solo UNDP/PAPP convoys have delivered supplies to Tulkarem and Qalqilya and medicine kits to the Medical Relief Committee and Ramallah Hospital. Mr. Timothy Rothermel, Special Representative of UNDP/PAPP, said he was "pleased with the efforts

UNDP/PAPP has taken to improve the dire circumstances of many Palestinians, and proud of the determination and commitment its staff members have shown responding to this crisis."

Since its inception in 1978, UNDP/PAPP has made a considerable and sustained contribution in assisting the Palestinian people, providing some \$400 million in development assistance through the generosity of the international donor community and UNDP itself. UNDP/PAPP has consistently proven to be one of the few organizations resident in the occupied Palestinian territory that has the capacity and expertise to implement emergency projects in a crisis situation.

*By Willi Scholl
This week in Palestine
May 2002*

Statement from AIDA

The international NGO community has a long history of solidarity with and support to the Palestinian people, and has been deeply saddened by the tragic events of recent weeks, and the suffering inflicted to the lives of so many of our friends, colleagues, and partners in Palestine, not to mention the massive destruction caused to infrastructure and property and the important ministries and local organizations that facilitate our work.

Some organizations' offices have been damaged or destroyed, and some have had to temporarily suspend ongoing projects, while devising and launching new activities that address the more urgent, and worsening situation on the ground. Some projects with broader and more long-term development goals have been reoriented in order to more effectively meet the most immediate local needs.

Many organizations find their work increasingly hindered by Israeli-imposed curfews and checkpoints, which prevent their staff from coming to work, or travelling to sites in the field. The opportunity cost of hours and entire workdays spent at checkpoints, offices that have been closed for weeks on end and cut off from communication, staff confined to their homes for a month or longer, and destruction and damage caused to local partner organizations whom we depend on, represent an enormous cost in resources to donor agencies and implementing organizations, that comes at a time when needs are greater than ever before.

The Association of International Development Agencies (AIDA) and its members - more than 55 international NGOs from Europe, North America, and Asia working in Palestine - are deeply concerned by restrictions on humanitarian access to the civilian populations of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. One joint initiative taken in April by the Palestinian Non-Governmental Organization Network (PNGO) and AIDA has been to organize several convoys of needed medicines, food, water, and shelter items for residents in Jenin and Nablus. This joint effort which is ongoing - has been a response to unprecedented military restrictions on humanitarian access to the civilian populations of

the West Bank and incidents of international and Palestinian agencies coming under fire. By working collectively, members of AIDA and PNGO improve the chances of successful aid provision.

While some international NGOs shift their efforts toward humanitarian relief, other NGOs are working to re-establish or ensure continuity of programming in sectors like education and training, capacity building, cultural activities, and areas that provide stability to and improve the quality of people's lives. And through AIDA and independently, many of the other NGOs are engaged in important advocacy programmes here and in their home countries, about the impact of the ongoing crisis on the communities they work with, and the factors that impede NGOs' ability to work effectively.

By *Michael S. Clark*

Chair (2001-2002), Association of International Development Agencies (AIDA)

This Week in Palestine - May 2002

UNICEF urges Mideast Leaders to end Violence for the Sake of Their Children

GENEVA/NEW YORK, 4 April 2002 - With the unprecedented escalation in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the United Nations Children's Fund is deeply concerned by the extensive use of violence by both sides and its immediate and long-term effects on children. Over the last weeks, Israelis and Palestinians have terrorised each other's communities, without regard for homes, schools, health centres and other public spaces where children are present. The impact of escalating violence on children's rights and well-being is both immense and lasting.

UNICEF calls for an immediate end to the violence. The psychological and social impact of armed conflict on children is incalculable. Traumatic events such as the death or injury of family and friends, house-to-house searches, and the humiliating round-up and detention of fathers and brothers cause irreparable damage to children's confidence in adults; increase their acceptance of violence as an adequate method for resolving problems; and dim their hope in the future. No lasting peace can be built upon such foundations.

In the immediate absence of a cease-fire, UNICEF strongly reiterates the need for both sides to abide by international humanitarian law, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child. UNICEF urges all parties to ensure that children are not targeted and enjoy protection under all circumstances. UNICEF calls for immediate bans on the use of ammunition against children and on the destruction of homes, schools and health facilities.

UNICEF is disturbed by the confinement of Palestinian families at home under curfew, many without water, electricity or gas and with food stocks rapidly running out. Children are being denied access to health services, and are unable to attend school and engage in social activity. UNICEF calls for the full co-operation of Israeli authorities in ending the curfews and guaranteeing women and children safe access to basic needs such as water, food, health services and education.

The current situation threatens the ability of UNICEF and other UN and international agencies to carry out their mandate in the occupied Palestinian territory. Over the last five days UN humanitarian agencies have been denied safe access to affected Palestinian communities, making it nearly impossible to deliver crucial aid. UNICEF calls for immediate access to vulnerable communities suffering under curfews and military incursions.

UNICEF urges both sides to step back and consider the tragic effect their actions are having on all the children of the Middle East. If today's generation does not have the opportunity to grow up in an atmosphere of trust, tolerance and justice, there can be little hope for stability in the region. It is the responsibility of Israeli and Palestinian adults to denounce violence and move toward peaceful solutions that offer real hope to their children and to future generations.

*Statement attributable to UNICEF Executive Director Carol Bellamy
This week in Palestine - May 2002*

New Jewish neighborhood established in capital

Construction work began yesterday on a new Jewish neighborhood next to the Arab neighborhood of Jebel Mukaber in southeastern Jerusalem.

The housing project, which received municipal approval several years ago, is being built by a group of private entrepreneurs on an empty hilltop next to the sprawling Arab neighborhood of 12,000 that borders East Talpiot.

Late Sunday night, workers began fencing off the boundaries of the 114-dunam (28.5 acre) site.

In the initial stage of construction, several hundred apartments are planned on the hilltop, which is to be called Nofei Zahav. Later phases are to include the installation of a cable car system and a six-story luxury hotel.

The company building the project, Di-Gal Investments and Holdings, Ltd., is headed by former Jerusalem police chief Aryeh Amit

Amit, who in the past supported the de facto division of Jerusalem, stressed yesterday that all required permits had been secured, and that the project is being built on privately owned land.

But local Arab residents said yesterday that part of the site, including an olive grove, belongs to them.

"There are people here, who have documents from Jordanian, British, and Turkish times, who have been living here since 1900," said resident Mahmoud Abdet, whose family contends that some of the land belongs to them.

Another resident, Palestinian attorney Hussein Abeida, said two dunams of the site belong to him. He said city officials had told him in the past that the land had been designated a "green zone," off-limits for construction of buildings.

Political reactions were quick to follow yesterday morning's Israel Radio news report of the construction of the new neighborhood.

Mayor Ehud Olmert welcomed the construction and said he is "very happy" with the timing of the move.

"The truth is that if it had been up to me, this neighborhood would have been built long ago," Olmert told Israel Radio, noting the land was purchased three decades ago.

He said that any Arab residents who have claims to the area can and should appeal to the courts.

Palestinians and left-wing politicians rushed to denounce the move.

Though dismissed by Olmert as the "same old question," the timing of the move was bemoaned by politicians on the Left who criticized the planned construction.

Foreign Minister Shimon Peres said the decision to build the neighborhood next to an Arab one was taken in a "very difficult, complex hour," and should have been discussed by the cabinet, rather than at the municipal level.

Going one step further, Meretz MK and opposition leader Yossi Sarid said yesterday that the construction of the neighborhood in Jebel Mukaber is "another provocative, unnecessary, and damaging adventure" taken by the "Sharon-Peres government."

"The government, which does not have one diplomatic initiative, has an excess of dangerous initiatives that distance a diplomatic agreement and encourage terrorism," he said. The government insists on "heating up the pressure cooker until it explodes," Sarid added.

Minister-without-Portfolio Dan Naveh (Likud) said yesterday in the Knesset that the neighborhood is merely an expansion of the Jerusalem neighborhood of East Talpiot.

MK Ophir Pines-Paz (Labor) is submitting legislation today that would prohibit the construction of Jewish neighborhoods in Arab areas of Jerusalem without government approval. He said the construction causes conflict between Jews and Arabs in the capital.

According to the accord put forward by former US president Bill Clinton at Camp David nearly two years ago, and endorsed by then-prime minister Ehud Barak, Arab areas of Jerusalem, such as Jebel Mukaber, were to have fallen under full Palestinian Authority rule as part of a final peace agreement.

*By Etgar Lefkovits
Nina Gilbert contributed to this report.
The Jerusalem Post - 4 June 2002*

Israelis and Palestinians urged to do an examination of Conscience

Nuncio calls for a break in the cycle of Terrorism and Reprisals

The papal representative in the Holy Land urged Israelis and Palestinians toward an examination of conscience that could help break the region's vicious circle of terrorism and reprisals.

"I condemn with my whole soul the acts of the suicide terrorists, but I must say that they are the expression of a people who have been left without doors or windows. They are signs of the desperation of a youth that sees no future," said Archbishop Pietro Sambi, the apostolic nuncio in Israel. He is also the apostolic delegate for Jerusalem and Palestine.

The archbishop makes his statements after the Palestinian suicide car bomb attack that killed 17 on Wednesday. The Italian Episcopal conference's Religious Information Service published the statements.

"Peace will not be possible in the Holy Land if Israel does not withdraw from the Occupied Territories and if it does not consent to the creation of a Palestinian state," the nuncio said. "Likewise, Israel's right to exist within safe and recognized borders is undeniable."

"Instead, at this time, reprisals are carried out on either side," the archbishop added. "This way does not create a future. I believe in love, respect and help for these two peoples. There are mistakes and motives on both sides, but neither wishes to make an examination of conscience."

"When I think of peace, the life of people, not something abstract, comes to mind," he continued. "In order to forge a different future, what is needed is respect for life understood as something sacred, and respect for agreements concluded. We hope to be able to reach peace without having to wait for mountains of dead."

"The Churches present in Israel represent only 2% of the population," Archbishop Sambi added. "It is evident that only the solidarity of those acting in the Western world can give importance to the work that Christians can do in those territories."

"Above all, Jews coming from Russia. It is a pastoral opportunity we must not lose. Tomorrow they might represent Catholics of Jewish expression."

Dialogue with Islam is possible but very difficult, he said. "However, it is a dialogue that willy-nilly must be carried forward."

"In any case, one must keep in mind that the interreligious dialogue is a different question from relations between states at the political level," the nuncio concluded.

Zenit - 7 June 2002

Roman stadium found in Tiberias

The remains of a monumental public building archaeologists think may be a stadium from the first century CE have been found during a dig on the grounds of the Galei Kinneret Hotel in Tiberias.

The form of the building, its hewn stone construction, and round southern end date it from the Roman period, when it served an important public function.

Moshe Hartal, an archaeologist with the Antiquities Authority, said it is possible the building is the stadium mentioned in the writings of Josephus Flavius.

"The stadium was used for athletic competitions, for horse races, and as a place to assemble the populace on special occasions," he said. "After the sea battle between the Jews and the Romans off Migdal, thousands of Roman captives were taken to the stadium. Some of them were killed and the others sold into slavery."

Hartal said in ancient times the building - the remains so far uncovered occupy a diameter of 39 meters occupied an area of hundreds of square meters. It was uncovered when a 10-meter long, three-meter deep trench was dug.

He said remains of mud found in the building's interior indicate it may have been used for water sports at a later date.

Other buildings from various periods, including the Byzantine, early Arab, and Fatimid, have also been uncovered.

The dig also provides evidence of two geological events that caused the collapse of the western side of the structure. As a result of the disturbances, walls collapsed or were uprooted. The events were probably the earthquake of 749 CE that caused the destruction of many settlements in the country, among them Beit She'an and Susita.

The Antiquities Authority is working to preserve the site and integrate it with the hotel.

*By The Jerusalem Post Staff
17 June 2002*

58 national parks, nature reserves to be closed

"The Israel Nature and Parks Authority has decided to close Masada, Ein Gedi, Tel Dan, Caesarea, Beit She'an and other sites throughout the country due to a lack of funds. The date of the closures was not announced.

INPA officials decided on the move last week, blaming a loss of NIS 80 million from depleted tourism because of the security situation and a lack of government funding.

Authority officials wrote to the Prime Minister, finance minister, and environment minister noting that the government had failed to approve the authority's budget for 2002, preventing it from carrying out its operations.

INPA noted that, in light of its failure to receive sufficient government funding, its line of bank credit had also dried up, making it unable to continue functioning.

The majority of funding for the authority comes from income from visitors, particularly tourists, but the various sites the authority maintains around the country have been hard hit by the drop-off in tourists from abroad and from local tourism due to the security situation.

Authority officials warned that the closure of the sites could cause permanent damage to nature spots, antiquities, and other national treasures.

Environment Minister Tzahi Hanegbi asked Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Finance Minister Silvan Shalom to find a budgetary solution to the problem. Hanegbi said that any delay in finding a solution could lead to the authority's complete collapse.

*By Jerusalem Post Staff
The Jerusalem Post - 23 June 2002*

Parks Authority delays shutdown for two days in hope of funding

The Israel Nature and Parks Authority (INPA) said yesterday that it will wait two days before closing down all of its sites due to a financial crisis. The delay comes in answer to a request by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to delay the drastic step in the hope that the Environment and Finance Ministries can reach an eleventh hour agreement on a budget package.

A meeting yesterday between Sharon and Environment Minister Tzahi Hanegbi ended with Sharon telling the Environment and Finance ministries to find the NIS 50 million that the INPA says it needs to keep functioning.

"The Prime Minister was very supportive of finding a solution," said environment Ministry spokesman Sharon Achdot.

However, at a time when the two ministries are being called upon to work together to save the INPA, the Treasury accused the Environment Ministry of causing the failure of an earlier plan to fund the INPA's deficit.

"The statement by the Finance Ministry is a lie," said Achdot.

The Finance Ministry said that during a meeting in early May, which was attended by Hanegbi, representatives from the Treasury, the director of the Ministry of Tourism, and the heads of the INPA, a plan was proposed which called for the Environment and Tourism Ministries to allocate funds from their own budgets. In the plan, the INPA would cut NIS 10m. from its own expenses, the Ministry of Tourism and the Environment Ministry would each provide NIS 22.5m. from their own budgets, and the Finance Ministry would budget an additional NIS 10m. The Treasury says that the Environment Ministry has not agreed to the plan, something the Environment Ministry denies.

"There was no such agreement at the meeting," says Achdot.

In the meanwhile, the INPA says that although it has made NIS 15m. in cutbacks, it has not received any money from the other parties present at the meeting.

The Tourism Ministry said although funding the INPA was discussed, no final decision was made as to what each ministry would provide. In previous years, the Tourism Ministry funded the development of INPA sites.

At the beginning of the week the INPA said it has run out of funding and that without increased funding it would be forced to close its parks, which include many national heritage sites.

If the funding is not forthcoming, the INPA will cease all of its operations, closing down its 58 sites around the country and leaving them unattended.

*By Stuart Winer
The Jerusalem Post - 25 June 2002*

SELECTIONS OF ITEMS FROM VATICAN INFORMATION SERVICE

Statistics for the Church in the World 1978-2000

For the occasion of the upcoming publication of the Statistical Yearbook of the Church - prepared by the Church's Central Statistics Office and containing information relative to the year 2000 - a communiqué was made public today illustrating variations on all continents between 1978, the year in which John Paul II began his pontificate, and 2000.

The number of baptized increased worldwide by 38 percent, going from 757 million in 1978 to just over one billion, 17.3 percent of mankind, in 2000. Catholics represent 62.8 percent of the population in the Americas, 40 percent in Europe and 2.9 percent in Asia.

From 1978 to 2000, the number of bishops increased from 3,714 to 4,541, a growth of almost 22 percent. The distribution of bishops over different geographical areas has undergone almost no change since 1978: all of America has 37.3 percent of all bishops, followed by Europe with 33 percent, Asia with 13.8 percent, Africa with 13.2 percent and Oceania with 2.7 percent.

As regards priests, in the year 2000 they numbered 405,178 (265,781 diocesan and 139,397 religious), a decrease of 3.75 percent compared with 1978. This reflects a reduction of 12.4 percent in the diocesan clergy and an increase of 1.26 percent in the religious. In Europe, the decrease in numbers of diocesan priests is progressive, while the drop in religious clergy is slighter. On the other hand, in Africa, Asia, America and Oceania, numbers grew more or less consistently.

Permanent deacons are the group that underwent the greatest evolution over the period in question: Numbers increased fivefold on all continents. Between 1978 and 2000 their numbers went from 5,562 to 27,824, a relative increase of 400.25 percent.

Unordained religious numbered 75,802 in 1978 and 55,057 in 2000. Though numbers fell in Oceania, Europe and the Americas, they grew in Africa and Asia. As for female religious, there were almost a million in 1978 and 801,000 in 2000, representing a decline of 19 percent over 22 years.

Among catechists, lay missionaries and members of secular institutes, only the latter group saw a small drop between 1990 and 2000, whereas the others grew considerably.

Finally, the number of candidates to the priesthood grew worldwide from 64,000 in 1978 to 111,000 in 2000, with an uninterrupted upward trend over the entire period.

VIS - 6 May 2002

"Great Relief" for the end of Siege of Basilica at Bethlehem

After praying the Regina Coeli with the faithful congregated in St. Peter's Square, John Paul II said: "We have all received with great relief the news that the basilica of the Nativity at Bethlehem has been reinstated to God and to the faithful.

"I give heartfelt thanks to all those who have contributed to restoring to the holy place its true religious identity. I am thinking particularly of the communities of Franciscans and the Greek and Armenian-Orthodox who, with notable sacrifice, remained faithful custodians of the shrine. I strongly encourage the population of Bethlehem and its surroundings to resume the path with faith and hope in God, who in their land became so close to man.

"My special envoy, Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, the bearer of my sentiments, is in Bethlehem today.

"The universal message of Bethlehem is: love, justice, reconciliation and peace. It is upon these bases that a future, respectful of the rights of the Israeli and Palestinian peoples, can be constructed, in reciprocal trust," he concluded.

VIS - 13 May 2002

Cardinal Etchegaray presides over Reconciliation Mass in Bethlehem

Cardinal Roger Etchegaray returned to Bethlehem yesterday, following the end of the siege of the Basilica of the Nativity in that town. As Pope John Paul's special envoy, he brought the Pope's blessing to everyone and presided over a Mass of "praise, expiation and reconciliation" in the Church of St. Catherine, adjacent to the Basilica.

"The holy place of the Nativity has undergone a long calvary," he said, "and this morning is Easter Sunday. ... Today's Mass must help everyone to discover the true roots of peace." Then, saying that the Mass would be one of "reconciliation and a resolute search for peace," the cardinal thanked all those whose efforts led to the end of the 39-day siege for their intelligence and imagination.

Archbishop Pietro Sambì, Apostolic Nuncio, and Fr. Giovanni Battistelli, Custos of the Holy Land, concelebrated with Cardinal Etchegaray.

VIS - 13 May 2002

No wars in the name of God! No Profanation in His Name!

At 6 p.m., local time, in the Presidential Palace in Baku, Azerbaijan, Pope John Paul met with representatives of the religious of the country and with men and women representing politics, culture and the arts.

Noting that the "three great religions (are) present in this country, Jewish, Christian and Muslim," the Pope said: "Despite the differences between us, together we feel called to foster ties of mutual esteem and benevolence. I am aware of all that is being done by religious leaders in Azerbaijan to favor tolerance and mutual understanding. I am looking forward to the meeting tomorrow with the representatives of the three monotheistic religions, so that together we can affirm our conviction that religion must not serve to increase rivalry and hatred, but to promote peace and love.

"From this country, which has held and still holds tolerance as a primary value of all wholesome life in society, we wish to proclaim to the world: enough of wars in the name of God! No more profanation in His holy name! I have come to Azerbaijan as an ambassador of peace. As long as I have breath within me, I shall cry out: Peace, in the name of God!"

"Praise to you, followers of Islam in Azerbaijan, for being open to hospitality, a cherished value of your religion and your people, and for having accepted the believers of other religions as brothers and sisters.

"Praise to you, Jewish people, who with courage and constancy, have kept your ancient traditions of good neighborliness, enriching this land with a contribution of great value and depth.

"Praise to you, Christians, who have given so much ... in shaping the identity of this land. Praise especially to you, Orthodox Church. ... When the fury of atheism was unleashed in this region, you welcomed the children of the Catholic Church who had lost their places of worship and their pastors, and put them into contact with Christ through the grace of the holy sacraments."

The Holy Father urged the men and women of culture and the arts to "transmit a taste for beauty to all those you meet!" He told them their contribution "is essential for the future of the Azerbaijani people. If culture is cast aside, if art is neglected and despised, the very survival of a civilization is imperiled."

Turning to the men and women of politics, he reminded them that their "specific activity is the service of the common good, the promotion of legality and justice, the guarantee of freedom and prosperity for all. But politics is also an area fraught with dangers. The selfish seeking of personal advantage can easily take over, to the detriment of faithful dedication to the common good." He remarked that "politics requires honesty

and accountability" and that politicians "cannot deceive themselves: people do not forget!"

John Paul II exhorted the leaders to "look to your young people and spare no effort on their behalf. They are tomorrow's potential. ... Above all, care must be taken to educate them in the important values which last and give meaning to life and its pursuits."

In closing, the Pope addressed the men and women of religion: "You should become ever more involved in proclaiming with sincerity and frankness the values in which you believe, without recourse to dishonest means that impoverish and betray the ideals you affirm. Take a hard look at the substance of these ideals, and avoid methods of persuasion that do not respect the dignity and freedom of the human person."

VIS - 23 May 2002

Ecumenism to mark Papal visit to Bulgaria

On May 11 in the Vatican, Pope John Paul II welcomed Bulgaria's foreign minister, Solomon Passy, Metropolitan Kalinik and a delegation from this Balkan nation on the occasion of the Feast of Saints Cyril and Methodius. In his speech, the Pope spoke of his imminent trip to Bulgaria, saying that "while my visit to your country will have a pastoral purpose, that of confirming my Catholic brothers and sisters in their faith, it is also my fervent desire to strengthen the bonds of Christian communion between the Catholic Church and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church."

Bulgaria, a nation of almost 8 million people, is bordered by Romania, Turkey, Greece, Macedonia and Serbia and has 354 kilometers (212 miles) of coastline on the Black Sea. Sofia, the capital, has 1.1 million inhabitants. Bulgarian, Armenian, Greek, Macedonian, Romanian and Turkish are the principal languages of the three main ethnic groups: Bulgarians (87 percent), Turks (9.4) and Gypsies (3.7). Orthodox are 86 percent of the population, Muslims 13 and Catholics, of both Latin and Byzantine rite, are 1 percent.

There are 80,000 Catholics in Bulgaria in 3 ecclesiastical circumscriptions and 54 parishes, under the pastoral care of 5 bishops, 51 priests and 88 religious. There are 68 catechists and 214 pastoral ministry workers. Archbishop Antonio Mennini is the apostolic nuncio in Bulgaria.

There are two Latin rite dioceses: Nicopoli, and Sofia and Plovdiv. Nicopoli, whose bishop is Msgr. Perko Jordanov Christov, O.F.M. Conv., has 30,000 Catholics. There are 7 seminarians and in 2001 there were 108 baptisms. The bishop of the diocese of Sofia and Plovdiv, which has 35,000 Catholics in 16 parishes, is Msgr. Gheorghii Ivanov Jovcev. There are 4 seminarians. In the year 2000 there were 276 baptisms.

There are 15,000 Catholics in the 20 parishes of the apostolic exarchate for Bulgarians of the Byzantine-Slavic rite. The apostolic exarch is Bishop Christo Proykov. There are 3 seminarians and last year there were 60 baptisms.

The Orthodox in Bulgaria number 8 million: there are 2,000 ecclesiastics and over 120 monasteries. His Holiness, Patriarch Maxim Marin Naidenov Minkov, was elected in 1971 as the head of the Orthodox Church in Bulgaria.

VIS - 24 May 2002

Division damages preaching of the Gospel

The Pope celebrated Mass this morning in private in the chapel of the apostolic nunciature and later went to the presidential palace to make a courtesy visit to the president of the Republic of Bulgaria, Georgi Parvanov. From there, he continued on to the patriarchal cathedral of St. Alexander Nevsky, the biggest Orthodox church in the Balkan peninsula, which was completed in 1912 and dedicated to Nevsky, prince of Novgorod, Russia in honor of the Russian liberators after five centuries of Ottoman domination.

At the end of the visit to the cathedral, the Holy Father went to the Monument of Saints Cyril and Methodius, where a floral wreath was laid, and then to the patriarchal palace where he was received by His Holiness the Orthodox Patriarch of Bulgaria, Maxim, and the fifteen members of the Holy Synod.

After a brief address by Patriarch Maxim, the Pope began his speech, in Bulgarian, by recalling that May 24 - the feast of Saints Cyril and Methodius - was a very significant day for him because, from the beginning of his pontificate, Bulgarian delegations have come to the Vatican on that date. Their visits, he said, "were pleasant opportunities to meet not only the noble Bulgarian nation but also the Orthodox Church of Bulgaria ... in the person of the Bishops who represented you. Today the Lord enables us to meet personally and to exchange 'the kiss of peace'."

"I come among you," he affirmed, "with a sense of esteem for the mission which the Orthodox Church of Bulgaria is undertaking, and I wish to express my respect and appreciation for your commitment to the good of the people of this land."

After praising the Bulgarian Orthodox Church's perseverance in proclaiming the Gospel for centuries, despite historical events that were "complex and at times hostile," John Paul II underlined that his visit, the first of a bishop of Rome to this country, was a reason for joy because "it is a sign of a gradual growth in ecclesial communion. Yet this cannot distract us from sincerely recognizing that Christ our Lord founded a single Church, while we today appear to the world divided, as if Christ Himself were divided." The Pope emphasized that this division was a scandal for the world and damaged "the preaching of the Gospel."

"One thing, however, consoles us," affirmed the Holy Father, "the estrangement between Catholics and Orthodox has never extinguished in them the desire to restore full ecclesial communion. ... Today we can give thanks to God that the bonds between us have been much strengthened." He recalled that Vatican Council II underlined that "the Orthodox Churches 'possess true sacraments, above all - by apostolic succession - the Priesthood and the Eucharist,'" recognizing also that "far from being an obstacle to the Church's unity, ... the diversity of customs and observances only adds to her beauty." The Pope cited as an example of unity Saints Cyril and Methodius, whose "witness is relevant even to those who, in the field of politics, are working to bring about European unification. ... The whole of Europe, both West and East, expects Catholics and Orthodox

to work together for the defense of peace and justice, human rights and the culture of life." John Paul II affirmed that the example of Cyril and Methodius was "emblematic for the unity of Christians in the one Church of Christ," and recalled that when the patriarch of Constantinople sent them to preach the true faith to enslaved peoples in their own language "in the face of obstacles placed on that path by the neighboring Western dioceses which claimed that it was their responsibility to bring the Cross of Christ to the Slav countries, they came to the Pope in order to have their mission confirmed."

At the end of his speech, the Pope offered the Bulgarian Orthodox community in Rome, "with a view to increasing our knowledge of each other, our mutual charity and our fraternal cooperation," the liturgical use of the Church of Saints Vincent and Anastasius at the Trevi Fountain. The Pope also gave the Bulgarian Orthodox Church a relic of St. Dasius, a soldier from Silistra, martyred in the fourth century in Rome, whose remains are preserved in the Italian archdiocese of Ancona-Osimo.

When the meeting was over, the Pope went to the apostolic nunciature to have lunch with the Catholic bishops of the country.

VIS - 24 May 2002

Pope disavows Bulgarian connection in attempt on his life

A joint statement was issued today by the Holy See Press Office and the Press Office of the President of the Republic of Bulgaria. Following are excerpts:

"The President of the Republic of Bulgaria Mr. Georgi Parvanov greeted His Holiness Pope John II and expressed his deep respect and recognition to the Holy Father for his contribution and active role aimed at strengthening peace in the world, at the building of a more just society and the promotion of a dialogue and understanding between religions and peoples. President Parvanov pointed out to the esteem of the Bulgarian people for the Holy Father, which excludes Bulgaria's involvement in the assassination attempt on his life.

[At this point, the Director of the Holy See Press Office, Joaquin Navarro-Valls, stated: 'I would like to add that the Pope has told the President that he had never believed in the so-called 'Bulgarian connection' which blamed a people whom he fondly likes and admires.']"

"Both sides confirmed the importance of respecting the principles of religious freedom and the freedom of conscience as the basic principles of democracy. A common desire to further develop bilateral relations in the social, charitable, scientific and cultural fields was expressed. Both sides also declared their readiness to start the preparation of an agreement between Bulgaria and the Holy See in that connection.

"Both sides condemned racism, xenophobia and ethnic intolerance and called for active measures against terrorism, organized crime, illegal drug-trafficking and the traffic

of people, child pornography and the exploitation of child labor. Globalization should go hand in hand with solidarity in order to prevent the growing gap between the rich and the poor countries."

"Both sides exchanged views on questions pertaining to peace, security and cooperation in Europe."

"The Holy Father voiced his support for the efforts of the Republic of Bulgaria to become a full member of the European Union in order to provide its contribution with its history and culture, which to a great degree have been forged by Christianity."

"Both sides expressed satisfaction with peace and stabilization in South-East Europe and particularly in the Western Balkans."

"The Balkans are part of Europe. Both sides agreed that it is necessary to do everything in their power for the faster integration of the region into the European Union, for its economic and social revival.

"Both sides voiced their deep anxiety over the ongoing violence in the Middle East. They emphasized that violence is to come to an end, Israeli-Palestinian negotiations are to be resumed in the nearest future through the joint efforts of the two sides as well, backed by the international community, in order to achieve a comprehensive, just and lasting resolution of the conflict. A common belief was expressed to the effect that peace talks are the only chance to find a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, on the basis of the principle 'land for peace' and on U.N. Security Council resolutions, by guaranteeing the right of all countries in the region to live in peace and security within the internationally-recognized borders."

VIS - 24 May 2002

Declaration on Pope's audience with U.S. President Bush

Following the encounter at 4 p.m. yesterday afternoon between the Holy Father and United States President George Walker Bush, Joaquin Navarro-Valls, Holy See Press Office director, made the following statement:

"Yesterday afternoon, May 28, the Holy Father received the president of the United States, George W. Bush and his entourage.

"The Pope wanted to thank President Bush for the deference he showed in coming to meet him on a day that had already been filled with many commitments and before he returned to the U.S.A. The president recalled the cordial visit that he and his family had last July with the Pope at Castelgandolfo and also told the Holy Father of the results of the (NATO) meeting at Pratica di Mare, as well as reviewing several current problems.

"During the audience with the Pope, the Secretary of State, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, and Archbishop Jean-Louis Tauran (secretary for Relations with States) held a meeting with the American Secretary of State, Colin Powell.

"In this meeting they spoke of the most urgent international problems, including the Middle East situation. In addition to the political aspects, they also took into consideration the humanitarian aspects of the dramatic situation being experienced by both the Israeli and Palestinian peoples. They also focussed on the difficult situation of Christians in the Middle East.

"The pope again expressed his closeness to the American people, following the events of last September 11.

"Lastly, His Holiness wished to express, despite the difficulties of the moment, his faith in the spiritual resources of American Catholics who are committed to witnessing to the Gospel values in society."

VIS - 29 May 2002

Pope asks for Restitution of Ecclesial Property in Romania

The Holy Father this morning received the Letters of Credence of Mihail Dobre, Romania's new ambassador to the Holy See. The Pope recalled his May 1999 visit to that nation, as well as the late Cardinal Alexandru Todea, the Romanian cardinal who suffered persecution and imprisonment during the years of communism.

The Pope praised Romania for the progress made on the path to democracy in the years since the fall of communism, and said he hoped "that such a path might constantly continue so that Romania will be able to make its voice be heard in an ever more authoritative manner in Europe and in the world." He noted that "the reforms in democratic, economic and social fields ... are bringing positive fruits for the good of everyone."

The Holy Father pointed to the Church's "convinced contribution ... to the path of renewal, especially through her structures in the social, educational and health sectors," in addition to "the evangelization and the care of souls."

During his trip to Romania, the Pope said, he saw "the good will that animates relations between the majority Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church" and, in Patriarch Teoctist, he saw "the deep awareness of the duty to work together to announce the one Gospel in Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life."

Remarking that difficulties do still exist, John Paul II said: "It is my fervent desire, for example, that, in matters regarding ecclesial structures, the agreements reached up to now between the leaders of the Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church and the Holy See, be enacted. ... Even with all the necessary prudence, the special mixed commission must take into account the real urgency, for the Catholic Church, to be able to use sacred buildings.

"Respect and collaboration would certainly be strengthened if the civil authorities would assume the duty of not only helping to find opportune solutions but also of returning, according to a criteria of justice, the confiscated ecclesiastical patrimony, which would thus allow the Catholic Church to use these goods to fulfill her mission."

In concluding, the Pope said that the Church "desires to encounter man in the various moments of his life: in the family and the worlds of work and culture, in hospitals and in every sphere in which he lives.... Also for this reason, I hope that the State will allow the Church to undertake a constant dialogue with public authorities, with the aim of reaching accords of cooperation in the diverse sectors of social life."

VIS - 3 June 2002

Patriarch Bartholomew sponsors Symposium on Adriatic Sea

Religion, Science and the Environment is sponsoring a six-day symposium on the Adriatic Sea, that starts tomorrow and ends June 10. The meeting is being sponsored by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople on the theme "The Adriatic, A Sea at Risk. Unity of Intentions." This is the fourth such symposium he has sponsored, following those dedicated to the Danube, the Black Sea and the Aegean Sea.

The meeting will be held aboard the ship Festos Palace during six days of navigation along the coasts of the countries that border the Adriatic. Participants will include scientists, representatives of various religious, people involved in ecology and the environment, politicians and journalists. Among those present will be Cardinals Walter Kasper and Roger Etchegaray and Bishop Giampaolo Crepaldi.

In Ravenna on June 9, Patriarch Bartholomew will celebrate, for the first time in 12 centuries, an Orthodox liturgy in the basilica of Sant'Apollinare in Classe. In Venice, on the afternoon of the final day, Patriarch Bartholomew I and Pope John Paul II will sign the "Declaration of Venice" in a ceremony that will take place contemporaneously thanks to a special televised linkup between Venice and the Vatican. Vespers in St. Mark's Basilica will conclude the symposium.

VIS - 4 June 2002

Appeals: Jerusalem attack condemned, Exodus of Human Beings

At the end of the general audience, celebrated this morning in the Paul VI Hall, the Pope made two appeals, one concerning yesterday's attack in Jerusalem and the other in the face of the "tragic exodus" of human beings:

"The dramatic news of the attack that sowed terror and death in Jerusalem yesterday can only provoke the most absolute condemnation by all. Yet again I repeat to those who plot and plan such barbaric acts that they will have to answer to God. While I express my fervent human and spiritual solidarity to the families in mourning and to the injured, I invite you all to pray with me to the Lord so that he convert hardened hearts and inspire reciprocal thoughts of peace and reconciliation in all those who live in that region which is for us so beloved."

Subsequently, John Paul II recalled that "tomorrow we celebrate World Refugee Day, sponsored by the United Nations in order to call attention to 15 million human beings, forced to cross the borders of their countries in order to escape persecution or the violation of their fundamental rights.

"May the leaders of nations," he said, "listen to this appeal in the face of such tragic exodus of individuals and families and may they do everything possible to offer an adequate response to the dramatic problems of these brothers and sisters of ours."

VIS - 19 June 2002

Religions and Peace: Inter-Religious Meeting in the Vatican

Cardinal Francis Arinze, President of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, organized and presided at a meeting of reflection in the Vatican on the role of religions in reconciliation and peace-building, as a follow-up to the Day of Prayer for Peace in the World, held in Assisi on January 24.

In the meeting, which took place June 7 through 8, members of different religions participated (Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism) from several countries, as well as a representative from the World Council of Churches in Geneva. During the meeting, the results of the Inter-religious Assembly celebrated in October of 1999 in the Vatican were also analyzed.

According to a communiqué published today, the participants agreed that it is necessary "to study together the role and resources of religions for peace both globally and locally" and they considered that "religions can contribute both to the prevention and resolution of conflicts." They also discussed organizing a series of workshops "in which fundamental texts would be studied, various models would be examined, and some symbolic action undertaken, in order to convey the message that religions can be a catalyst for peace and justice."

The participants also discussed the formation of an advisory group which would cooperate with the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue to implement the suggestions made.

VIS - 19 June 2002

Angelus: Necessity to contemplate the heart of Christ

Before praying the Angelus today at midday with the faithful gathered in St. Peter's Square, John Paul II affirmed that "the month of June is marked in a special way by devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Celebrating the Heart of Christ means going to the intimate center of the person of the Savior."

The Pope said that "if the human heart represents an unfathomable mystery that only God knows, how much more sublime is the Heart of Jesus in which the very life of the Word beats! In it ... all the treasures of wisdom and science and all the fullness of divinity are to be found."

"How necessary is the message derived from the contemplation of the Heart of Christ for contemporary humanity! Today I wish to entrust in a special way all those who live in the Holy Land to the merciful Heart of Jesus: Jews, Christians and Muslims. That Heart, full of shame, never nurtured feelings of hatred or vengeance, but asked pardon for its killers; that Heart shows the only way to exit the spiral of violence: the way of the pacification of souls, reciprocal comprehension and reconciliation."

After the Angelus, the Holy Father indicated that "from the region of Qazvin, situated in northwest Iran, there arrives news of a violent earthquake that has caused numerous deaths, injuries and serious damage. I elevate to the Lord fervent prayers for the victims, their families and for all those who suffer due to the dramatic consequences of the earthquake. I encourage the efforts of the rescue workers and I hope for an immediate and generous response of international solidarity in the face of this grave situation."

VIS - 24 June 2002

Holy See adheres to convention against torture

Today, "International Day of support for torture victims", declared by the United Nations, the Holy See decided to adhere - in the name of the City State of the Vatican - to the Convention against torture, other punishment and inhumane and degrading cruel treatment.

According to a note published today, this Convention was adopted by the general assembly of the United Nations on December 10, 1984 and enacted on June 16, 1987. Up until now, it has been ratified by 129 states. The instrument of adhesion, signed by John Paul II, will be placed in the United Nations secretary general's office in New York by Archbishop Renato Martino, permanent observer of the Holy See, along with the following declaration:

"The Holy See considers the Convention against torture and other punishment or degrading and inhumane cruel treatment, a valid and ideal tool for the fight against acts that constitute a grave attack on the dignity of the human person. In the contemporary age, the Catholic Church has declared itself constantly in favor of unconditional respect for life itself and has condemned unequivocally everything that violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, physical and mental torture, including psychological coercion' (Vatican Council II, Pastoral Constitution 'Gaudium et Spes', December 7, 1965)".

In the note, it is recalled that the Code of Canon Law as well as the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1992) "clearly identify and mention behavior that can hurt the physical or moral integrity of the person, reproach leaders and urge the abolition of these

acts." In addition, the note concludes, both John Paul II and Paul VI condemned torture and cruelty against people on different occasions.

VIS - 26 June 2002

Concern for Brothers who live in the Holy Land

John Paul II received at midday participants in the annual meeting of the Assembly of Works of Assistance to the Oriental Churches (ROACO).

"The special attention with which the Apostolic See follows developments of the situation in the Holy Land, and specifically, the prolongation of the state of tension in the Middle East, prompts me to recommend to your prayers our brothers in the faith who live there."

"I am sure," he continued, "that your effort, thanks also to the traditional collection for the Holy Land, will facilitate the arrival of concrete signs of Christian solidarity to the those martyred regions from the most diverse places in the world. In addition, I am convinced that you will discover in this charitable act grateful correspondence from the pastors and the faithful of the Oriental Catholic Churches and the Latin Community in the Holy Land."

The Holy Father reminded the members of ROACO that their mission was "to respond ever-more attentively and immediately to the urgent needs of the Oriental Catholic Churches, trying to opportunely involve the local communities. ... In this process which is so important," he concluded, "the Congregation for the Oriental Churches, which sustains the varied initiatives that you promote in the field of study, liturgy, in formative commitment and in pastoral projects, is along side you."

VIS - 27 June 2002