



The Holy See

***ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO HIS EXCELLENCY Mr MORDECHAY LEWY
AMBASSADOR OF ISRAEL TO THE HOLY SEE****

Monday, 12 May 2008

Your Excellency,

I am pleased to welcome you at the start of your mission and to accept the Letters accrediting you as Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the State of Israel to the Holy See. I thank you for your kind words, and I ask you to convey to President Shimon Peres my respectful greetings and the assurance of my prayers for the people of your country.

Once again I offer cordial good wishes on the occasion of Israel's celebration of sixty years of statehood. The Holy See joins you in giving thanks to the Lord that the aspirations of the Jewish people for a home in the land of their fathers have been fulfilled, and hopes soon to see a time of even greater rejoicing when a just peace finally resolves the conflict with the Palestinians. In particular, the Holy See values its diplomatic relations with Israel, established fifteen years ago, and looks forward to developing further the growing respect, esteem and collaboration that unites us.

Between the State of Israel and the Holy See there are numerous areas of mutual interest that can be profitably explored. As you have pointed out, the Judeo-Christian heritage should inspire us to take a lead in promoting many forms of social and humanitarian action throughout the world, not least by combating all forms of racial discrimination. I share Your Excellency's enthusiasm for the cultural and academic exchanges that are taking place between Catholic institutions worldwide and those of the Holy Land, and I too hope that these initiatives will be developed further in the years ahead. The fraternal dialogue that is conducted on an international level between Christians and Jews is bearing much fruit and needs to be continued with commitment and generosity. The holy cities of Rome and Jerusalem represent a source of faith and wisdom of central importance

for Western civilization, and in consequence, the links between Israel and the Holy See have deeper resonances than those which arise formally from the juridical dimension of our relations.

Your Excellency, I know that you share my concern over the alarming decline in the Christian population of the Middle East, including Israel, through emigration. Of course Christians are not alone in suffering the effects of insecurity and violence as a result of the various conflicts in the region, but in many respects they are particularly vulnerable at the present time. I pray that, in consequence of the growing friendship between Israel and the Holy See, ways will be found of reassuring the Christian community, so that they can experience the hope of a secure and peaceful future in their ancestral homelands, without feeling under pressure to move to other parts of the world in order to build new lives.

Christians in the Holy Land have long enjoyed good relations with both Muslims and Jews. Their presence in your country, and the free exercise of the Church's life and mission there, have the potential to contribute significantly to healing the divisions between the two communities. I pray that it may be so, and I invite your Government to continue to explore ways of harnessing the good will that Christians bear, both towards the natural descendants of the people who were the first to hear the word of God, and towards our Muslim brothers and sisters who have lived and worshipped for centuries in the land that all three religious traditions call "holy".

I do realize that the difficulties experienced by Christians in the Holy Land are also related to the continuing tension between Jewish and Palestinian communities. The Holy See recognizes Israel's legitimate need for security and self-defence and strongly condemns all forms of anti-Semitism. It also maintains that all peoples have a right to be given equal opportunities to flourish. Accordingly, I would urge your Government to make every effort to alleviate the hardship suffered by the Palestinian community, allowing them the freedom necessary to go about their legitimate business, including travel to places of worship, so that they too can enjoy greater peace and security. Clearly, these matters can only be addressed within the wider context of the Middle East peace process. The Holy See welcomes the commitment expressed by your Government to carry forward the momentum rekindled at Annapolis and prays that the hopes and expectations raised there will not be disappointed. As I observed in my recent address to the United Nations in New York, it is necessary to explore every possible diplomatic avenue and to remain attentive to "even the faintest sign of dialogue or desire for reconciliation" if long-standing conflicts are to be resolved. When all the people of the Holy Land live in peace and harmony, in two independent sovereign states side by side, the benefit for world peace will be inestimable, and Israel will truly serve as *מְיוֹגֵל רוֹא* ("light to the nations", Is 42:6), a shining example of conflict resolution for the rest of the world to follow.

Much work has gone into formulating the agreements which have been signed thus far between Israel and the Holy See, and it is greatly hoped that the negotiations regarding economic and fiscal affairs may soon be brought to a satisfactory conclusion. Thank you for your reassuring words

concerning the Israeli Government's commitment to a positive and expeditious resolution of the questions that remain. I know that I speak on behalf of many when I express the hope that these agreements may soon be integrated into the Israeli internal legal system and so provide a lasting basis for fruitful cooperation. Given the personal interest taken by Your Excellency in the situation of Christians in the Holy Land, which is greatly appreciated, I know you understand the difficulties caused by continuing uncertainties over their legal rights and status, especially with regard to the question of visas for church personnel. I am sure you will do what you can to facilitate the resolution of the problems that remain in a manner acceptable to all parties. Only when these difficulties are overcome, will the Church be able to carry out freely her religious, moral, educational and charitable works in the land where she came to birth.

Your Excellency, I pray that the diplomatic mission which you begin today will further strengthen the bonds of friendship that exist between the Holy See and your country. I assure you that the various departments of the Roman Curia are always ready to offer help and support in the fulfilment of your duties. With my sincere good wishes, I invoke upon you, your family, and all the people of the State of Israel, God's abundant blessings.

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