

Pope meets Israeli PM, discusses Iran threat

Thursday May 14, 2009

NAZARETH, Israel (Reuters) - Pope Benedict practiced dialogue and diplomacy on Thursday, discussing Iran's threats against Israel with the Jewish state's prime minister and singing a peace song at an inter-faith meeting with Muslims and Jews.



Pope Benedict (C) celebrates mass in the Church of the Annunciation in the northern Israeli city of Nazareth May 14, 2009. (REUTERS/Jonathan Nackstrand/Pool)

The pope spent the penultimate day of his trip in Nazareth, the boyhood home of Jesus in northern Israel's Galilee region.

At the end of a meeting attended by Christians, Jews, Muslims and Druze, a rabbi told the group he had composed a song for peace using three words or phrases for peace "Salaam" (Arabic), "Shalom" (Hebrew) and "Lord grant us peace".

A Vatican spokesman said the unscripted gesture surprised the pope, who has been criticised in the past for a lack of spontaneity. The group clasped hands in what appeared to be a heartfelt gesture and some participants swayed as they sang.

"It illustrated dramatically that religion does not have to be the problem but the solution and that it is up to politicians to engage religious leaders in the search for peace," said Rabbi David Rosen of the American Jewish Committee, who was on the stage with the pope.

Before the inter-faith meeting, the pope held private talks with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu while Vatican and Israeli diplomats held a separate meeting.

A Vatican spokesman said the pope and the prime minister, who met Jordan's King Abdullah earlier in the day in Amman, discussed "how to advance" the Middle East peace process.

Netanyahu told an Israel's Channel 1 television station afterwards that they also discussed threats by Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad against Israel.

"I asked him as a moral figure to make his voice heard loudly and continuously against the declarations coming from Iran about their intentions to destroy the state of Israel," the prime minister said.

"We said it cannot be that at the start of the 21st century, a state arises that says it intends to destroy the Jewish state, and that a very strong and aggressive voice isn't heard condemning this phenomenon," he said.

The pope has several times condemned Ahmadinejad indirectly for his comments against Israel or for denying the Holocaust, and Vatican officials have done so directly.

"He said he condemns all such phenomena, anti-Semitism and hatred, and I think we found a listening ear," Netanyahu said.

The stalled Middle East peace process has been one of the main themes of the trip, which began a week ago in Jordan and ends on Friday when the pope leaves Jerusalem for Rome.

FAMILY CONCERNS

On Thursday morning, the pope used his visit to Israel's Galilee region, the heartland of the country's minority Arab population, to express his concern about what the Catholic Church sees as the deterioration of the family around the world.

More than 50,000 people attended an outdoor mass -- celebrated in Arabic, English and Latin -- in the area of Nazareth known as Mount Precipice, where the Bible says a mob tried to hurl Jesus off a cliff.

There, Benedict spoke of "the sacredness of the family, which in God's plan is based on the lifelong fidelity of a man and a woman consecrated by the marriage covenant and accepting of God's gift of new life".

He added: "How much the men and women of our time need to reappropriate this fundamental truth, which stands at the foundation of society, and how important is the witness of married couples for the formation of sound consciences and the building of a civilization of love!"

The Catholic Church is against divorce and homosexual marriage and has ascribed many of society's ills to the breakdown of the traditional family.

The pope said government legislation should be aware of the common good that the traditional family offers society and protect it, with financial assistance if necessary.

(Additional reporting by Allyn Fisher-Ilan in Jerusalem)

Copyright © 2008 Reuters