

Few Arab priests travel freely in Holy Land

JERUSALEM – As Israeli-granted multiple-entry visas expire, Arab priests and seminarians in the Holy Land increasingly are facing the dilemma of not being able to return to their jobs if they leave to visit home.

The Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem is predicting dire consequences if the Israeli policy of denying one-year multiple-entry visas to Arab religious remains the same. An internal memo noted that if the policy is not canceled by June, the patriarchate will lose most of its clergy, the seminary will be closed and many parishes will be left without priests.

Father Humam Khzouz, chancellor of the Latin Patriarchate, said that almost a year ago priests and religious – including seminarians – from Lebanon, Syria and Iraq were denied one-year multiple-entry visas. In August, the policy of denying such visas was extended to priests and seminarians from Jordan and Egypt, Arab countries with which Israel has signed peace agreements and has diplomatic relations.

Father Khzouz said the Latin Patriarchate includes Israel, the Palestinian territories, Jordan and Cyprus, and the priests must be free to travel throughout the diocese in order to serve the church. He said some 250 Catholic men and women religious – including seminary students, priests, nuns and friars – are affected by the policy. He said that 80 percent of them have been in the country for more than 10 years. Half of the patriarchate's 30 Arab parish priests now are faced with the visa dilemma, he said.

He said the visa-application procedure can take at least two months and can only be started once the applicant has left the country.

"The seminary students have three vacations a year when they can see their families. Now if they leave for Jordan during their (Christmas) vacation, we (will) need to start the whole visa-application procedure again. You can't ask a boy of 11

not to go visit his mother,” Father Khzouz said. He noted that there are 50 minor and major seminary students from Jordan.

“If the situation remains this way the students will have to sacrifice either their studies or their relationship with their families. The major seminary students will have no choice; they need to complete their studies,” he said.

Father Khzouz said he hoped a solution would be found by Christmas so that the students would be able to travel to visit their families.

A spokeswoman for the Israeli Ministry of Interior said the directive to deny the visas had come from security officials. She said that although there are real security concerns the ministry was holding talks with the officials in order to try “to ease” the situation for the clergy. But, she said, it would “take more than a day or two” to find a solution.

“My parents are sick, but if I leave to visit them I can’t come back,” said one priest whose visa expired at the end of October and who has not yet received a new one. The priest, who leads a Catholic Scout troop in his parish, said he was unable to attend an international conference of Catholic Scouts in Jordan in November because of the visa situation.

Father Khzouz said the new policy also affects the priests’ ability to travel abroad to other countries for conferences, talks and meetings.

Several years ago, Israel rescinded two-year residency visas for foreign clergy who had lived in Israel for five years and a temporary-residence visa for those who have been in the country more than 15 years, which would also have entitled them to national health insurance coverage.

Father Khzouz said Latin Patriarch Michel Sabbah of Jerusalem, Archbishop Antonio Franco, the papal nuncio to Israel and the Palestinian territories, and several bishops have met with Israel’s interior minister on at least two occasions but have received no assurances that the situation would change, though they were told that perhaps “important” members of the clergy would be issued multiple-entry visas.

“Who is important? And who is to decide who is important? Everyone is important,”

Father Khzouz said.

In a letter written earlier in the year, Patriarch Sabbah, Father Pierbattista Pizzaballa, who is in charge of Christian sites in the Holy Land, and other patriarchs noted that the restrictions “are compromising the freedom of the Catholic religion and of its clergy by preventing them from properly serving the church.”

Father Khzouz said they have received no written response to the letter.

“It is not humanly right to make us prisoners. We are cut from our relationship with the universal church,” said Father Khzouz. “This is killing the life of the local church ... which needs local priests and nuns.”