Israel OKs multiple-entry visas for 'high-ranking' workers

JERUSALEM – The Israeli Ministry of the Interior has agreed to provide multiple-entry visas to "high-ranking church personnel" who must travel in and out of Israel for their work.

In a letter to Archbishop Antonio Franco, papal nuncio to Israel and the Palestinian territories, Interior Minister Meir Sheetrit said the church would need to submit a list of such personnel to be "checked and approved" by the ministry before the multiple-entry visas would be issued.

Sheetrit said all other religious who need to leave Israel for work would be able to apply and receive re-entry visas to Israel before departure from the country, thus avoiding the complication of having to apply for such a visa from outside Israel.

Emergency cases would be treated as such and would be dealt with "immediately and on the spot," wrote Sheetrit.

A copy of the January letter was obtained by Catholic News Service Feb. 6.

However, Archbishop Franco said the church "was not fully pleased with the changes."

"Even parish priests need to move around. In the Latin patriarchate they have many meetings and pastoral duties. (The priests) do not fit into (the category) of VIPs. The practicality, it is not there. It is more complicated," he said. "I hope there will be an evolution (of the process.)"

The Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem covers all Latin-rite priests in Israel, the Palestinian territories and Jordan. Church officials have said priests – especially those coming from Arab countries or territories – have had problems obtaining re-entry visas.

Archbishop Franco said Feb. 6 that, since his return to Jerusalem at the end of

January from a monthlong trip to Italy, he has not received any new official complaints from priests about travel problems.

"I hope it will run smoothly," he said.

Father Humam Khzouz, chancellor of the patriarchate, said that even theoretically the proposed solution was not a real solution.

"Who are 'high-ranking' priests? It is very vague," he said. "Saying we will make it easier is not making it easier."