

Only 48 Gazans attended papal Mass, say Holy Land church officials

JERUSALEM - Only 48 residents of the Gaza Strip - about half as many as originally reported - were able to attend the May 13 papal Mass in Bethlehem, West Bank, said Archbishop Antonio Franco, Vatican nuncio to Israel and the Palestinian territories.

"One hundred and twenty permits were given but only 48 (people) came; we are not aware of why," he said May 20 at a press conference on the results of Pope Benedict XVI's May 8-15 trip to the Holy Land.

Latin Patriarch Fouad Twal of Jerusalem said his patriarchate had requested 250 permits allowing Gazan residents to travel to Bethlehem to attend the Mass.

Following the Mass, church officials said there had been 95 Gazan residents present, but the figure was based on information they had been given a day earlier, said Wadie Abunasser, spokesman for the local church committee that organized the papal visit. He said that only later did it become apparent that the number was much lower than they thought.

Patriarch Twal said 50-60 Palestinian Christians - including some from Gaza and the West Bank - were able to meet privately with the pope during a ceremony at the Palestinian presidential palace in Bethlehem later May 13.

"President Mahmoud Abbas left the room and left them alone with the pope," said Patriarch Twal.

Archbishop Franco said he hoped Pope Benedict's discussion with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu about multiple-entry visas for clergy from Arab counties would make the process of travel in and out of Israel easier. The Latin patriarchate has said that not having such visas hinders the priests' ability to carry out their pastoral work and prevents them from being able to visit their families.

“It is too early to look at results,” said Archbishop Franco. “Nothing is magic. We hope something will come of it and some problems may be solved. Perhaps it won’t solve all problems, but we hope that the visit will be a good occasion for many things.”

Monsignor Raphael Minassian, patriarchal vicar for Armenian Catholics in the Holy Land, told journalists he renewed his visa May 19.

“I got a visa immediately without any problems. Last year when I had to renew my visa I had to go through procedures. This time I got it without any procedures,” he said.