

Pope asks chivalric order to continue helping Christians in Holy Land

VATICAN CITY - Pope Benedict XVI asked the knights and dames of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulcher of Jerusalem to continue praying and working to help Christians in the Holy Land, who are "burdened by an uncertain and dangerous climate."

The pope met Dec. 5 with 125 leaders of the chivalric organization, which is dedicated to supporting the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem and to responding to the needs of Catholics in the Holy Land.

U.S. Cardinal John P. Foley, grand master of the order, told Pope Benedict that in the last eight years the 23,000 knights and dames had donated almost \$50 million to the Catholic Church and its institutions in the Holy Land.

"The major part of these schools and institutions serve not only Catholics from the Latin Patriarchate, but all Christians and, in reality, the entire population - Christians, Muslims and Jews," the cardinal said.

Cardinal Foley told the pope he was certain the region's Catholics "share with me the hope that Your Holiness could visit some of the places where our order provides its services when you make the pilgrimage you hope to make to the Holy Land."

The Vatican confirmed in late November that initial discussions were under way with the Israeli government for a papal trip, possibly in May 2009.

"The land of Jesus truly needs justice and peace," the pope told the knights and dames, asking them to continue to work and pray for peace in the region.

"Ask the Lord to make you convinced and sincere ambassadors of peace and love," he told them. "Ask him to enrich your constant work in support of the burning desire for peace with the power of his love."

In the presence of Latin Patriarch Fouad Twal of Jerusalem, grand prior of the knights, Pope Benedict said he wanted to offer a personal message to the region's Christians, "who continue to suffer because of the political, economic and social crises in the Middle East, which are made even more burdensome by the worsening global situation."

"How can we not share the pain of those sorely tried communities?" the pope asked. "At the same time, how can we not thank those who generously work to come to their aid?"

As Christians prepare to celebrate Christmas, Pope Benedict asked Mary to watch over the Christians of the Holy Land and to give encouragement to "those who want and are able to contribute to building a better world."