

Pope expresses hope for Annapolis peace conference

VATICAN CITY – Pope Benedict XVI said he hoped the U.S.-sponsored peace conference in Annapolis, Md., would help Palestinians and Israelis reach a “just and definitive solution.”

The pope endorsed the U.S. bishops’ call for prayers for the success of the conference, saying prayers were needed so that negotiators will have the “wisdom and courage” to take real steps toward peace.

He said the Palestinian-Israeli conflict “for 60 years has been bloodying the Holy Land,” causing “so many tears and so much suffering among the two peoples.”

The pope made the remarks Nov. 25 at the end of a Mass that he concelebrated with 23 new cardinals. The conference and related meetings Nov. 26-28 include participants from Israel, the Palestinian territories and several Arab states.

The Vatican also was sending a delegation to the conference.

In a recent letter, Chicago Cardinal Francis E. George, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, urged U.S. bishops to call parishes and individuals to pray for peace, especially in the days before the conference on the Middle East.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas were attending the conference, as well as representatives from Saudi Arabia and Syria.

Asked about the Annapolis conference, Latin Patriarch Michel Sabbah of Jerusalem told Catholic News Service Nov. 25 that he appreciated all efforts for peace, but he wished that U.S. presidents would not wait until the very end of their second mandates to push for new peace initiatives.

Patriarch Sabbah said he understood that in a president’s first four years there could be serious political costs if such initiatives failed, but said that establishing an effective peace process will take more than a year.

He said the main element in the success of such talks is the will for peace.

“People must want it. Peace has to come from the heart. Everyone cries, ‘Peace, peace,’ but they continue to make war,” the patriarch said.

Father Pierbattista Pizzaballa, who is in charge of Christian sites in the Holy Land, said that while the Annapolis conference had generated media excitement expectations were low among the people of the Holy Land.

The best hope seems to be that the conference can “establish the foundations for a serious dialogue among the parties,” he told Vatican Radio Nov. 25.

He said the key issues that need to be confronted include mobility inside the Palestinian autonomous zone and recognition of real Palestinian autonomy, and eventually of a Palestinian state.

At the same time, he said, the Palestinian side needs to give guarantees of a serious commitment to avoid all forms of violence.

He said he thought the majority of the area’s population has been exhausted by the conflict and would welcome an agreement that was serious and practical.

Contributing to this story was Cindy Wooden.