

Pope: Holy Land trip will be mission of peace

VATICAN CITY – Pope Benedict XVI said his trip to the Holy Land in May would be a pilgrimage of prayer for peace in the Middle East and the entire world.

The pope, speaking at his noon blessing March 8, confirmed that the visit would take place May 8-15. His planned itinerary will take him to Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian territories.

The pope said he was making the Holy Land pilgrimage “in order to ask the Lord, by visiting the sacred places of his earthly passage, for the precious gift of unity and peace for the Middle East and all humanity.”

“Even now I am counting on the spiritual support of all of you, so that God may accompany me and fill with grace all those I will meet along the way,” he said.

The pope also asked for prayers for the success of his visit to Cameroon and Angola March 17-23. He said he was traveling to Africa “to show the concrete closeness of myself and of the church to the Christians and other peoples of that continent, which is particularly dear to me.”

Vatican trip planners traveled to the Holy Land in late February to work out details of the papal program there. The preliminary schedule calls for the pope to arrive in Amman, Jordan, May 8 and proceed to Israel May 11, presiding over events in Jerusalem and Nazareth and in Bethlehem, West Bank.

The visit is expected to include a visit to a mosque in Amman, a stop at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem, a visit to a Palestinian refugee camp and several outdoor liturgies.

It will be the first papal trip to the Holy Land since 2000, when Pope John Paul II traveled a similar route during the Holy Year.

Israeli President Shimon Peres, who had more than once invited the pontiff to visit

Israel, welcomed the pope's official announcement of the trip.

"I am delighted that His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI has responded positively and accepted my invitation to visit the Holy Land," Peres said.

"The pope will be a most honored guest, welcomed and respected by people from all walks of life. His visit will be a moving and important event bringing the spirit of peace and hope," he said.