Pope welcomes project to promote vaccine research

VATICAN CITY – Pope Benedict XVI congratulated the finance ministers of Italy, Great Britain, Canada and Russia for their efforts to promote the development of vaccines to reduce child mortality in poor countries.

At a Feb. 9 meeting with the four ministers and Queen Rania of Jordan, the pope said, “Every service rendered to the poor is a service rendered to peace.”

“In this era of globalized markets,” he said, “we are all concerned about the growing gap between the standard of living in countries enjoying great wealth and a high level of technological development and that of underdeveloped countries where poverty persists and is even increasing.”

Pope Benedict said, “The creative and promising initiative launched today seeks to counter this trend, since it aims to create ‘future’ markets for vaccines, primarily those capable of preventing infant mortality.”

The finance ministers – Gordon Brown of Great Britain, Tomasso Padoa-Schioppa of Italy, James M. Flaherty of Canada and Alexei Kudrin of Russia – were in Rome for the launch of a pilot project for the Advanced Market Commitments for Vaccines.

Mr. Padoa-Schioppa told the pope that, while the scientific capability exists for developing vaccines to fight some of the most common deadly diseases in poor countries, pharmaceutical companies often do not invest in research and development because the poor countries would not be able to afford the new vaccines.

“The industry is not willing to invest time and resources to develop products that too few people have the money to buy,” he said. “And public funding of research is not enough to fill the gap.”

The advanced market commitments are designed to overcome the problem by securing government and other donor commitments to purchase a large quantity of

the vaccines when they are developed.
The pilot project is focused on the development of a vaccine for strains of the pneumococcal bacteria, which causes bacterial pneumonia and bacterial meningitis. The World Health Organization estimates that more than 1.6 million people, including almost 1 million children under the age of 5, die each year from pneumococcal infections.

Effective vaccines for pneumococcal bacteria already exist, but they target the strains most common in Europe and North America.

Mr. Padoa-Schioppa told the pope, “International organizations estimate the pilot AMC will prevent approximately 5.5 million deaths by 2030. We hope that with the help of other donors other similar projects will soon be possible, starting with a similar initiative for malaria.”

Technical support for the pilot project is being handled by the World Bank and the GAVI Alliance, a public-private partnership focused on promoting immunization programs in the world’s 72 poorest countries and on developing new vaccines.

The February audience was not Pope Benedict’s first contact with GAVI and with Brown, the British finance minister.

In early November, Pope Benedict bought the first bond issued by the International Finance Facility for Immunization, a project initiated by Brown and coordinated by GAVI to finance the immunization of 500 million children in poor countries.