

# Vatican confirms tentative plans for papal visit to Holy Land in 2009

VATICAN CITY - The Vatican has confirmed tentative plans for Pope Benedict XVI to visit the Holy Land in 2009.

Israeli sources said the most likely time for the visit would be in May, with stops in Israel and the Palestinian territories.

The pope was invited to visit Israel by Israeli President Shimon Peres in 2007. At that time, the pope made it clear he hoped to make the trip, but Vatican diplomats said the timing would depend in large part on efforts to calm the simmering Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In recent months, Israeli and Vatican officials began making more concrete plans for a papal visit. The contacts were first reported Nov. 27 by the Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz and were confirmed by the Israeli Embassy to the Holy See.

Ha'aretz said the most likely time frame for the trip was the second week in May. It said the papal nuncio to Israel and the Palestinian territories, Archbishop Antonio Franco, told Peres in early November that the pope had decided to visit the country.

The Vatican spokesman, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, confirmed that "diplomatic contacts are under way to study the possibility of a papal trip to the Holy Land during the course of next year." He gave no dates or details.

Father Lombardi declined to speculate on whether the papal visit would include a stop at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial in Jerusalem. The Vatican has urged officials at the memorial to remove from a permanent display a photo caption stating that Pope Pius XII did nothing to condemn the Nazis and their slaughter of the Jews.

Church officials have called the caption offensive and have defended Pope Pius for working quietly during World War II to help save thousands of people, including many Jews. In October, Father Lombardi reiterated the Vatican's objections to the Yad Vashem display, but said it was not a decisive obstacle to a papal visit.

Pope Benedict has one other scheduled foreign trip on his calendar for 2009, a visit to Cameroon and Angola in March.

Pope Paul VI was the first modern pontiff to visit the Holy Land, making a pilgrimage there in 1964. In 2000 Pope John Paul II made a Holy Year visit to the Holy Land, one of a series of biblical pilgrimages he undertook in his later years as pope.