

Vatican, Israel make progress on financial, juridical issues

VATICAN CITY – Vatican and Israeli representatives said they finally have a concrete plan for reaching an agreement on financial and juridical issues related to Catholic institutions in Israel.

“The talks took place in an atmosphere of great cordiality, mutual understanding and good will, and produced important progress and hope for yet further advances in the coming months,” said a joint statement issued after the representatives met May 21 at the Vatican.

The meeting marked the first time in five years that the full membership of the bilateral permanent working commission met to discuss the issues related to church property, taxation and the legal rights of church institutions in Israel.

When the Vatican and Israel agreed in late 1993 to establish full diplomatic relations, they also agreed to set up a joint commission to negotiate an agreement on the church’s legal status and related financial issues. The commission’s work had been marked by long periods of inactivity when the Israeli side declined to schedule meetings or canceled them.

Aaron Abramovich, director-general of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs and head of the Israeli delegation, told reporters after the May 21 meeting: “It was a really good day. We believe we are on the right track.”

A series of subcommission meetings have been planned over the next six months, he said, and then the entire commission is to meet again in Jerusalem in early December.

While a time limit for finalizing the agreement has not been set, “we believe we are on the fast track,” he said.

Franciscan Father David Jaeger, a member of the Vatican delegation, said “the meetings were very warm and friendly and especially aimed at constructing an

agreement. So there was not just a good feeling, but important concrete progress.”

“Instead of just saying ‘we will meet again,’ a structure has been agreed upon” for tackling the issues, he said.

Neither Mr. Abramovich nor Father Jaeger would go into details about what had been discussed, explaining that with a “global accord” no one part is considered settled until the entire package is approved by both sides.

Father Jaeger said the Vatican’s hope is that the agreement would formalize under Israeli law the status of the church that existed before Israel became a nation.

“The other thing is that the church must feel secure, including with its goods, especially regarding the holy places and the resources necessary to maintain them,” the Franciscan said.

From the beginning of the negotiations in 1994, Vatican officials have asked Israel to:

- Guarantee Catholic access to juridical due process through the Israeli court system when property disputes arise. Israel’s position has been that church property disputes are matters to be handled by the government, not the courts.
- Formally extend the exemption from taxation enjoyed by church properties and institutions before Israeli statehood.
- Return confiscated church properties. The most discussed property has been the site of a church shrine, destroyed in the 1950s, in Caesarea.