

Vatican say relations with Israel better before ties

VATICAN CITY - With new problems over visas for foreign priests and the long, ongoing negotiations needed to resolve the tax status of Catholic institutions in Israel, the Vatican's former ambassador to the country said relations were better before there were full diplomatic ties.

Archbishop Pietro Sambi served as the Vatican nuncio to Israel for seven years before being named the nuncio to the United States in 2005.

An interview with the archbishop was published Nov. 16 in the online edition of Terra Santa magazine, a publication of the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land.

Archbishop Sambi told the magazine, "To be frank, relations between the Catholic Church and the state of Israel were better when there were no diplomatic relations."

Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, Vatican spokesman, told reporters Nov. 17 that Archbishop Sambi's remarks reflected "his thought and personal experience."

The Vatican, Father Lombardi said, continues to hope "for a rapid conclusion of the negotiations already under way" and for close cooperation in resolving "the existing problems."

Although issues related to the juridical and financial status of the Catholic Church had not been fully clarified, the Vatican went ahead and launched full diplomatic relations with Israel in 1994 "as an act of trust," certain that Israel would act quickly to finalize agreements on the legal and financial issues, Archbishop Sambi said.

An agreement on the juridical questions was signed in 1997 and work on financial questions continues.

The work on the financial agreements has involved 10 years of “negotiations rendered useless by the postponements of meetings on the part of the Israeli delegation (and) by the delegation’s lack of power to negotiate. In a word, because of an absence of political will, it still has not been signed.”

“Anyone can see what kind of trust can be placed in the promises of Israel,” he said.

Archbishop Sambini added, “The problem of visas for Catholic religious personnel was easier to solve when diplomatic relations did not exist between the Holy See and Israel.”

Oded Ben-Hur, Israel’s ambassador to the Vatican, told Catholic News Service Nov. 16 that he was “really surprised” at the criticisms, “especially coming from our good friend, Archbishop Sambini.”

“I know where he’s coming from; there have been difficulties, but I see the situation much more positively,” Ben-Hur said.

The Israeli ambassador said Vatican and Israeli delegations met in Jerusalem Nov. 7 to prepare for a Dec. 12-13 meeting of the full negotiation teams and, with new Israeli proposals on the table, “things are going much better.”

Ben-Hur said he also understood the concern of church leaders regarding the impact on priests and other church workers of new restrictions on multiple-entry visas.

The Israeli interior ministry, he said, had decided too many people had multientry visas valid for a long period of time. In the government’s efforts to restrict the number of visa holders, church personnel from Europe and other Western countries faced new restrictions.

“The Ministry of the Interior has promised to resolve the problem very soon,” Ben-Hur said.

The question of multiple-entry visas for church personnel from Arab countries is different, he said.

“That is in the hands of the security services and makes it more difficult to resolve,” he said. “Visas for personnel originally from countries that are at war with us are a question of security.”

“I am making every effort to facilitate as many visas as possible,” he said.

Father Humam Khzouz, chancellor of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem, told CNS in early November that almost a year ago priests, religious and seminarians from Lebanon, Syria and Iraq were denied one-year multiple-entry visas. In August, the policy was extended to priests and seminarians from Jordan and Egypt, Arab countries with which Israel has signed peace agreements and has diplomatic relations.

About 250 Catholic personnel are affected by the policy, Father Khzouz said.