



NEWS

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

ARCHBISHOP KEELER WELCOMES AGREEMENT BETWEEN HOLY SEE AND ISRAEL
WASHINGTON--At a December 30 news conference, in the presence of the papal nuncio and the ambassador of Israel, Baltimore Archbishop William H. Keeler, president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops/United States Catholic Conference, welcomed the signing today of a fundamental agreement between the Holy See and the State of Israel. "We pray," he said, "this accord will be another arch in the edifice of peace that must be built in the Middle East."

Under terms of the agreement, the signatories plan to exchange ambassadors in this coming year. "Catholic and Jewish Americans," the Archbishop said, "can welcome together the normalizing of relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel which today's signing sets in motion." The normalization of relations, the Archbishop added, marks "a major step forward in the dialogue of reconciliation between the Roman Catholic Church and the Jewish people emphasized by the Second Vatican Council."

According to Church officials, the key to the agreement consists in the affirmation of religious liberty and freedom of conscience. The treaty, Archbishop Keeler said, "will permit not only the Catholic Church, but other historic religious communities as well, to play a responsible role in Israeli national life."

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The Fundamental Agreement, as it is called, also gives legal recognition to the historic rights of the ancient Churches to the holy places. Known collectively as "the status quo" these rights dating from the first half of the nineteenth century had been observed by successive Israeli governments, but until now had not received legal ratification under Israeli law.

Noting anxieties over the pace of the peace process brought on by delays in implementation of Palestinian autonomy, Archbishop Keeler expressed the hope that the Vatican-Israeli agreement would be seen as "a beacon along the path to lasting peace."

In a statement in support for the Church in the Holy Land, Archbishop Keeler commented that the Fundamental Agreement "foreshadows a new stage of life" for Catholics in Israel. "The local Church," he said, "can act with the new confidence of its vital place."

Archbishop Keeler continued, "We are convinced the Church in the Middle East must be not only a place of ancient shrines, but also a community of living faith. A vital Christian community in the Holy Land is essential not just for us us, but for all who care about the future of the Middle East."

The full text of Archbishop Keeler's remarks are attached.

Also accompanying this release is a joint statement of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Synagogue Council of America.

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Statement of
Archbishop William H. Keeler
President, NCCB/USCC
on
VATICAN-ISRAEL FUNDAMENTAL AGREEMENT
December 30, 1993

The Catholic Bishops of the United States, with our long and vital relations with the American Jewish community, and, I believe, Catholics at large, are pleased that today in Jerusalem the Holy See and the State of Israel have signed articles of fundamental agreement and will soon exchange ambassadors. We pray this accord will be another arch in the edifice of peace that must be built in the Middle East. We believe it is a positive and historic moment in the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Jewish people in this country.

(1) The Fundamental Agreement

Religious Liberty. As Americans and believers, we are encouraged that the cornerstone of this agreement is the mutual recognition of religious liberty and freedom of conscience. We acknowledge the solemn commitment of the State of Israel and of the Holy See to uphold this most basic of human rights.

This treaty guarantees that full measure of religious freedom which will permit not only the Catholic Church, but other historic religious communities as well, to play a responsible role in Israeli national life. In particular, recognition of the so-called 'status quo' provides firm legal protection for the customary rights of all the ancient churches.

Normal Diplomatic Relations. Catholic and Jewish Americans can welcome together the normalizing of relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel which today's signing sets in motion. With this event, we take a major step forward in the dialogue of reconciliation between the Roman Catholic Church and the Jewish people emphasized by the Second Vatican Council. It provides an important means for continuing dialogue in the search for a just and lasting peace in the region and other important matters.

Common Commitments. In this Agreement, both parties undertake to oppose anti-semitism and other forms of intolerance. Catholics and Jews in the United States can join in this commitment by furthering mutual understanding and promoting peaceful relations, particularly between Israelis and Palestinians.

(2) The Path to Peace

Light in Darkness. In this Christmas season, Catholics celebrate God's light shining in darkness. In the Holy Land today, there is a kind of dim winter light that breeds doubts in many minds. Many feel disappointment that the agreement between Israel and the PLO signed three months ago has yet to produce fruit. In this moment, we pray that this new Agreement will be seen as a beacon along the path to lasting peace.

Other initiatives are urgently needed to sustain the momentum for peace, especially to fulfill the commitments for Palestinian autonomy. With the Assembly of Catholic Ordinaries of the Holy Land, "we urge political leaders to take rapid measures which prove the sincerity of their intentions and (make) tangible progress in the reestablishment of rights, justice and human dignity" for two peoples who, though they are loved by the one God, have too long suffered from hostility, division and injustice.

(3) Hope for the Local Church

For the Church in the Holy Land, the Fundamental Agreement foreshadows a new stage of life. The local church can act with new confidence of its vital place. The Church in the United States is very appreciative of this development. We will continue to do all we can to support the community of faith in the Holy Land. We are convinced the Church in the Middle East must be not only a place of ancient shrines, but also a community of living faith. A vital Christian community in the Holy Land is essential not just for us, but for all who care about the future of the Middle East.

As my friend, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Michael Sabbah commented last week, "The Christian presence [in the Holy Land] goes back 2,000 years. It is a very important element in the identity of the land. Therefore, the Church must be present in any solution, in any walk toward peace [CNS, 12/21/93]." We shall watch attentively as joint commissions continue with the vital work of implementing the concrete form of the Church's legal status in the next stage of negotiation.

We ask the entire community of faith to join us in prayer that this important day will be a concrete step toward a just and lasting peace in the land all believers call holy.

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The National Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Synagogue Council of America rejoice in the agreement which has been signed between the state of Israel and the Holy See. It is more than a diplomatic agreement between two sovereign powers. It represents a revolution in the relations almost 2,000 years old, between the Catholic Church and the Jewish people. Behind the political aspects of the agreement, there is the more significant fact of the mutual recognition and regard of two ancient faiths, linked by history and common origins to one another.

These developments, we believe, have grown naturally out of the far reaching dialogue which has been going on between the Catholic Church and representatives of the Jewish people for more than a quarter of a century. In the frequent meetings of the International Committee for Inter-religious Consultations and the Vatican Committee for Religious Relations with the Jews, the question of mutual recognition has invariably been on the agenda, as a matter having religious as well as political significance. The declaration agreed upon between these two bodies, with papal approval, in 1987, did much to improve Catholic Jewish relations by denying that the Catholic Church had any theological objection to the existence of a sovereign Jewish state.

The relations between the Synagogue Council and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops both have reflected the spirit of international dialogue and we believe, have contributed to the accord which has been achieved by uniting a major Catholic community and the largest Jewish Diaspora community in urging mutual recognition.

While we recognize that the accord which has just been signed is simply a preliminary agreement and many complex problems need yet to be resolved, we are convinced that it will bring rich rewards. It includes condemnation both of anti-Semitism and of all forms of religious and racial intolerance. But even more, it demonstrates that dialogue and an attempt to achieve mutual understanding and regard may be translated into political action and reality and lay the ground work for a more peaceful world.

December 29, 1993