

# Palestinians meet with John Paul II

by Umberto Pascali

In a discussion with the director of the Jerusalem-based Christian-Islamic Al-Liqa Center, *EIR* received what may be the first public statement to date on the content of the historic message sent to Pope John Paul II this month by the highest Islamic authority of Jerusalem.

Dr. Geris Sa'ed Khoury told us: "In his letter to the Pope, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem restated the unity of the Palestinian people, both Christians and Muslim, and stressed that the position of the Pope is welcomed positively by both people. The Grand Mufti also thanked John Paul II for his continuous appeals for peace and expressed the hope that international legality be applied to every country of the world, and the hope that the Pope will continue helping the Palestinians."

The letter was delivered by a personal representative of the Grand Mufti, Thiab Ayyoush (see his interview in *EIR* of March 22), during the meeting of the Holy Father with an Islamic-Christian delegation from Jerusalem on March 14. Thanking the Pope for his efforts to keep the Persian Gulf war from setting Muslim against Christian, Dr. Ayyoush said he told the Pope: "You have fought for mutual understanding among the religions, and thus we did not feel the war was a religious war."

## Hope against hope

The Pope opened that audience with a surprising departure from his written text: "I express my desire to go to Jerusalem, and *contra spem speravi* [I hope against hope]. These words of St. Paul could have been also the words of our common father Abraham. Abraham, too, received a promise marked by a deep contradiction, and I hope for my visit to Jerusalem as I hope for my visit to Lebanon, a visit to pray and to be with everybody."

The meeting with the delegation, led by the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Michel Sabbah, can be considered as the first concrete step of the new peace offensive in the Mideast, launched by the Vatican after the ad hoc religious summit of March 4-5, where all the Patriarchs of West Asia gathered to meet with the Pope, along with the bishops of the countries involved in the Gulf war. "You belong," the Pope told his guests, "to a group conducting a dialogue between Muslims

and Christians who have chosen this not always easy road, to reach mutual understanding and to help bring about justice and peace."

He then proposed: "Your group should grow and develop and broaden its horizons. It is already a valid testimony, above all when, after the suffering and the injustice increased by a recent conflict, it seems that there are the first signs of a quest for a solution. . . ."

## Toward an ecumenical dialogue

Another leading member of the delegation, Father Nicola Bux, told *EIR*: "The Pope asked us explicitly to broaden our activity. He said, broaden your group, broaden all your activities!" Father Bux is the director of the Europe Near East Center (ENEC) based in the city of Bari, in southern Italy. Bari has been the historic reference point for many commercial, political, cultural, as well as religious exchanges between Europe and the Arab world, especially through the annual *Fiera del Levante*, the Fair of the Levant.

Father Bux explains: "The delegation from Jerusalem, consisting of the leadership of the Christian-Islamic Al-Liqa Center, was accompanied and sponsored by us at ENEC. Our chairman, Sen. Pietro Mezzapesa, gave the Pope our statute in three languages, to symbolize our commitment. So the Pope invited Al-Liqa to broaden its activities, its dialogue with non-Christian entities, and ourselves at ENEC to support the Christian community."

What are the chances to relaunch a real ecumenical dialogue in the Arab world? "The situation," says Father Bux, "is ambivalent. First of all, one must say that Islam's genuine message is not aggressive or bellicose toward other believers. Yes, there has been a danger to view the Gulf war as a religious war. But the Holy See's stance appears to have averted that terrible danger. When Islam doesn't get flattened into simplistic or reductionist political positions, it is clearly much freer to start a religious dialogue."

"In fact, I think that the initiative of the president of the Pan-Islamic Conference, to send a letter to the Pope just during the summit with the Patriarchs at the Vatican, is extremely symbolic. And the fact that the Grand Mufti sent a message is a clear recognition of the role played by the Catholic Church, by the Holy See, at this time. Thus it is rather difficult to argue still that the Catholic Church and the 'West' are identical and that the warmongering position of a part of the West is that of the Church."

"It is clear that there are forces in the Islamic world, as the bishop of Algiers pointed out recently, who tend to lump together apples and oranges, but the shrewdest authorities, who are the majority, have realized this. . . . On the other side, it is evident that Israel is categorically refusing to accept any discussion of Jerusalem, because they have annexed Jerusalem. But it is also true that the United Nations has not recognized that annexation at all. Now we should see, as happened for Kuwait, whether there is the strength to enforce

the U.N. resolution calling for Jerusalem to be a *corpus separatum*. In reality, the Holy See no longer insists on the *corpus separatum*, but rather speaks about an internationally guaranteed special statute. As Monsignor Tauran, the Vatican 'foreign minister,' said, this means requesting a series of international guarantees concerning the Christian communities, access to the holy places, their juridical status."

Father Bux continues: "It is clear that besides these basic points, there has not yet been real progress. So much so, that two years ago, Patriarch Sabbah asked the ENEC to work out a study to give content to this formula. Now we are preparing an international seminar in Bari, during the *Fiera del Levante*, with the participation of scholars of law, history, diplomacy, and so on. We will put out a draft to define what this Internationally Guaranteed Special Statute means. After that, we must submit it to an inter-Catholic discussion forum and then to the analysis of the several Christian denominations present in Jerusalem, and finally to Muslims and Jews. This is the beginning of the process."

While Bux explains the broader plan from the standpoint of an expert in law and history, Patriarch Sabbah expressed this same concept in pastoral terms. The dialogue among believers, he said in his address to the Pope, "will help politicians to strengthen the dialogue, in mutual respect and with the aim of carrying out justice, as the only secure borders and the only way to protect the two peoples in conflict. . . . Both Palestinians and Israelis must have the same rights and the same duties guaranteed: the right to freedom, independence, to decide their political future; and duties of mutual respect and recognition, both being protected in their dignity as human beings and children of God, both protected by one justice and free from fear, from the spirit of revenge, and from any oppression."

In his address to the Pope, the director of Al-Liqa, Dr. Khoury underlined a sentence from a speech made by John Paul II months ago: "The Palestinian problem is my personal problem." Khoury told *EIR*: "I repeated that very beautiful sentence to the Pope, and I told him, if it is your personal problem, then we can be secure that your work for the good of our people will continue what you and your predecessors have already done. I refer to the University of Bethlehem, which was built thanks to Pope Paul VI and can continue to function thanks to this Pope. It is a great thing, which gives thousands of Palestinians the possibility to study and to work. This decreases the emigration of the Christians, just for a start.

"In my speech, I told the Pope twice that the PLO is the only representative of the Palestinians, and that whoever doesn't want to deal with the PLO doesn't really want peace. The Pope listened and was smiling throughout my address. At the end, he thanked me for the present we brought from Palestine. He touched it and was moved. He said, so this is wood from a Bethlehem olive tree? It was a reproduction of Leonardo's 'Last Supper,' inlaid on olive wood."

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## El Salvador

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# Superpowers decree FMLN the winner

by Gretchen Small

Elections for the national legislature and municipal governments in El Salvador took place on March 10, but for Moscow and Washington, how the citizens of that country actually voted is irrelevant. The two powers are determined to force El Salvador's government to share power with the terrorists of the Farabundo Marti Liberation Front, who are demanding international recognition of FMLN rule over parts of the country, and the disbanding of the nation's Army, as their minimal conditions for turning in their weapons.

Lest there were any doubt as to the agreement on this strategy, on March 15, Secretary of State James Baker signed a joint statement with his Soviet counterparts calling upon the Salvadoran government to "accelerate the process of negotiations."

### Arena won, fair and square

As is now customary for the developing sector, hundreds of foreign observers swarmed over the country on election day to "monitor" voting procedures. At the end of the voting, even the foreigners announced that the elections had been fair, with only minor irregularities.

Initial election results demonstrated once again that the anti-communists continue to hold a firm majority in El Salvador. The ruling, anti-communist, Nationalist Republican Alliance (Arena) won around 45% of the vote; the Christian Democrats held onto their second place with some 25%; and vying for third place were an Arena-ally, the National Reconciliation Party (PCN), and the coalition of parties allied with the FMLN, the Democratic Convergence (CD).

This was the first time FMLN supporters had run in elections in their own name, and from the standpoint of the superpower condominium, the crucial issue in the elections was the CD's vote. Western media made clear that the Anglo-American Establishment hoped a large vote for the CD would give the pro-power-sharing forces a majority in the Legislative Assembly, and thus provide a "democratic" cover for what they planned anyway. London's *Financial Times* wrote hopefully on the eve of elections that a strong vote by the FMLN's supporters would "break the right-wing grip on the