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**PROMOTING A PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE:
JOHN PAUL II AND THE MIDDLE EAST**

For over thirteen centuries the history of the relationship between Christianity and Islam has been one of wars of conquest and reconquest and of bitter polemics. However, there have been always on both sides voices advocating a more positive attitude and a need for dialogue and understanding¹. The twentieth century finally witnessed long awaited and promising developments². The pontificates of John XXIII and Paul VI brought about a new attitude of the Church towards Islam and its followers, officially acknowledged by the Second Vatican Council in the two significant documents, namely the Constitution of the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, no 6, and the Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*, no 3³. The first text in *Lumen Gentium* is very brief and it deals with Islam in the following words:

But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place among these are Muslims, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the same one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge the mankind⁴.

As for the second text on Islam in *Nostra Aetate*, it is much more developed. It consists of two parts. The first, namely the doctrinal describes the values of the Muslim faith and worship and points out the values common to Islam and Christi-

¹ See a recent article: D. Rudnicka-Kassem, *Chrześcijaństwo-islam. Koegzystencja, polemika, dialog*, "Politeja" 2004, no. 1, p. 45-57.

² Refer to: J. Waardenburg (ed.) *Islam and Christianity: Mutual Perceptions since the Mid-20th Century*, Leuven 1998.

³ For the complete text and the analysis of both documents see: R. Caspar, *Islam according to Vatican II. On the Tenth Anniversary of Nostra Aetate*, "Encounter" 1976, vol. 21, January, p. 1-7.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

anity. The second part of it is directed towards the practice of dialogue and collaboration. Furthermore, it urges the followers of both religions to “strive sincerely for mutual understanding” and “make common cause of safeguarding and fostering social justice, moral values, peace and freedom”⁵.

The idea of interreligious dialogue, and in particular of that between the Christians and the Muslims was in large part inspired and introduced by Paul VI⁶. The Pontiff was a person of great personal sensitivity with extraordinary receptivity to other cultures and modes of thought and religious sentiment. Paul VI had many contacts with scholars sympathetic to Islam and a long-standing profound friendship with the French Islamicist Louis Massignon. During his pontificate he welcomed the establishment of diplomatic relations with the countries with majority or significant number of Muslims and the Muslim leaders were cordially received at the Vatican.

The new attitude towards non-Christian religions, including Islam, embraced the term *dialogue*. This term, that is both the norm and the ideal, was introduced to the Church in Paul VI's encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* on August 6, 1964⁷. Since that time, the term *dialogue* which means not only a discussion but also includes all the positive and constructive interreligious relations with individuals and communities of other faiths, has been frequently used by the Council as well as in the Church related teaching⁸.

As an institutional sign of the desire to meet and to relate to the followers of other religious traditions of the world Paul VI established in 1964, the Secretariat for Non-Christians, including the section for Muslims. The competence of this new institution was defined by the Constitution *Regimini Ecclesiae*:

To search for methods and ways of opening a suitable dialogue with non-Christians. It should strive, therefore, in order that non-Christians come to be known honestly and esteemed justly by Christians and that in their turn non-Christians can adequately know and esteem Christian doctrine and life⁹.

The idea of interreligious dialogue found a spokesman and an activist in the person of Paul VI's successor, namely John Paul II who indeed continued that initiative. His first remarks on Islam were given in Ankara on 30 November 1979¹⁰. While addressing the Catholic community there, the Pope spoke about the religious patrimony of Islam and its spiritual values. He expressed his respect for Muslims and spoke words of friendship to his Islamic brothers and sisters. During the subsequent months John Paul II assured the world about his commitment to continue,

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

⁶ The contribution of Paul VI to the development of Christian-Muslim dialogue is discussed extensively by G. E. Irani in: *The Papacy and the Middle East: The Role of the Holy See in the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1962-1984*, Notre Dame 1986.

⁷ For the text of *Ecclesiam Suam* see, for example: www.vatican.va.

⁸ Refer to the Document of the Secretariat for Non-Christians, *The Attitude of the Church towards the Followers of Other Religions*, English edition, Vatican Polyglot Press 1984.

⁹ M. L. Fitzgerald, *The Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions is Ten Years Old*, “Islamochristiana” 1975, vol. 1, p. 96-97.

¹⁰ See. E. Sakowicz (ed.), *Islam w dokumentach Kościoła i nauczaniu Jana Pawła II (1965-1996)*, Warsaw 1997, p. 61-65.

promote and develop a sincere dialogue with Muslims in the spirit of *Nostra Aetate*.

There is no doubt that John Paul II unified the religious and the socio-political dimensions of the Church in unprecedented fashion¹¹. He made the Vatican into a modern nation-state, turning it into a full-fledged player in the world's affairs and the state with ever-expanding diplomatic ties around the globe. From the beginning of his pontificate, John Paul II displayed intense interest and involvement in peacekeeping, in social justice in the Third World and in religious freedom and the observance of human rights everywhere. Furthermore, he also stressed his particular concern with the situation in the Middle East, the area where the political, social and religious tensions come to the fore and where a sincere dialogue seems to fail¹².

Papal involvement in the Middle East was essentially motivated by his concern to protect the welfare of Catholic minorities¹³. John Paul II was alarmed to discover that the prospects for the survival of the indigenous Christian communities in the Holy Land were so precarious. Thousands of Palestinians had left Jerusalem after 1967, under the pressure of Israeli occupation. It is estimated that in the last four decades nearly half of the Christian population has emigrated from the Holy Land.

In the Middle East, Christian minorities live in a society that is predominantly Muslim. Therefore, according to the Pope, it was his duty to encourage and promote dialogue of life between the Christian and the Muslims. However, when it came to the question of the peace in the Middle East, that dialogue had include a third party, namely the followers of Judaism. All the diplomatic efforts of the Pope, then, were directed to promote a peaceful coexistence and to win the respect for the human rights of Jews, Christian and Muslims.

In 1991, while addressing the participants of an interreligious meeting in Rome, the Pope said:

Jews, Christians and Muslims, as we know, come from different religious traditions, but have many ties to each other. In fact, all the believers of these three religions refer back to Abraham, *pater omnium credentium*, for whom they have a profound respect, although in different ways. Peace among these religions constitutes such a great good and such an important contribution to all of human society. If there is not an amiable peace among these religions how can harmony in society be found?¹⁴

Why was the Pope's involvement in Middle East affairs that important? We all know that the situation in the Middle East is extremely difficult. We also know that military solutions are short-lived and may only result in further conflict and

¹¹ For a broad discussion on the issue refer to: F. X. Murphy, *The Papacy Today*, New York 1981, p. 177-239.

¹² A. Kreutz, *The Vatican and the Palestinians: a historical overview*, "Islamochristiana" 1992, vol. 18, p. 121.

¹³ *idem*, *Vatican and the Palestinian – Israeli Conflict: the Struggle for the Holy Land*, Westport 1990, p. 153-154.

¹⁴ *The Holy See's address to Christians, Jews and Muslims during an interreligions meeting in Rome*, "Islamochristiana" 1991, vol. 17, p. 291-292.

violence. In the light of the policy adopted by John Paul II, the Holy See became an important transnational actor¹⁵. First and foremost the Holy See intervened in world affairs as a religious institution. Despite the fact that it did not have political, economic or military means at its disposal, the Holy See was one of the very few actors (if not the only actor) in international affairs, that had to rely on the impact of the moral prestige of the Pontiff¹⁶. John Paul II did not threaten anybody but he spoke, addressing both the political leaders and the common people. His words in their symbolic value carried a great weight. Therefore he was able to awaken people's consciousness, forcing them to re-think and re-assess their ideas and their actions and eventually made them consider seriously his opinion and apply it in resolving the complex issues of Middle East realities.

John Paul II's diplomacy in the Middle East was focused on two fundamental issues, namely the Palestinian – Israeli dispute and the status of the Holy Places. With regard to the Palestinian issue, the Pope expressed the essence of the Vatican's position in October 1979. During his speech to the United Nations he said:

The first stone of a general overall peace in the area, a peace that, being necessarily based on equitable recognition of the rights of all, cannot fail to include the consideration of a settlement of the Palestinian question¹⁷.

Since the beginning of his pontificate John Paul II was very attentive to the conflicts and tensions in the Middle East. The course of political developments in the region, including the Geula Cohen Law to annex Jerusalem and the Pope's official and unofficial meetings with political leaders, such as President Carter, King Hassan of Morocco, King Hussein of Jordan, Vice-President Mubarak of Egypt, Israeli officials and PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization) envoys contributed significantly to his increased understanding of Middle Eastern problems, especially the Palestinian – Israeli dispute.

The Pope's growing awareness of that issue in particular was emotionally expressed in his speech delivered in Otranto, on October 5, 1980:

The terms of the Middle East drama are well-known: the Jewish people, after tragic experiences connected with the extermination of so many sons and daughters, driven by the desire for security, set up the state of Israel. At the same time, the painful condition of the Palestinian people was created, a large part of whom are excluded from their land. These are facts that are before everyone's eyes. And other countries, such as Lebanon, are suffering as a result of a crisis that threatens to be a chronic one¹⁸.

The Otranto speech was a clear affirmation of the Holy See's recognition of the political rights of both the Jews and the Palestinians. Following the policy of

¹⁵ G. E. Irani, *The Papacy and the Middle East...*, p. 4.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 4-5, 159-160.

¹⁷ M. Parker, *Priest of the World's Destiny John Paul II*, Milford 1995, p. 64.

¹⁸ E. Sakowicz (ed.), *Islam w dokumentach Kościoła...*, p. 71.

his predecessor Paul VI¹⁹. John Paul II begun to take a firmer stand in defense of the rights of the Palestinian people.

When in June 1982 Israel invaded Lebanon, John Paul II became the most outspoken in defense of the Palestinians²⁰. The day after the invasion (June 7, 1982), the Pope told president Regan, on an official visit to the Vatican, that the crisis in Lebanon “merits the attention of the world because the danger it contains of further provocation in the Middle East with immense consequences for world peace”²¹. On June 8, he sent a telegram to the Lebanese president Elias Sarkis to express his preoccupation with the situation. He also sent Mother Teresa of Calcutta to West Beirut to demonstrate solidarity with the victims of Israeli bombardment. On 15 September Pope met with Yasser Arafat. During the audience, the Pontiff spoke against “recourse to arms and violence in any form and above all, to terrorism and reprisals”, and once again called for a Middle East peace that recognized “the right of the Palestinians to a country of their own”²². The meeting was concluded in the joint statement condemning terrorism. The audience was strongly criticized by the Israelis²³. It dusted off charges of Pius XII’s silence during the Holocaust and Arafat was accused of aiming to “complete the work” of Hitler. In response Vatican called Israel’s statement “surprising, almost incredible... an outrage”.

John Paul II’s meeting with Arafat also caused a further deterioration in the Holy See’s relations with several personalities in the Maronite community who believed that Christians in the Middle East have no other recourse than armed self-defense against Muslims²⁴. One day after the meeting, Israeli-sponsored Christian militias perpetrated a massacre against Palestinian civilians in the camps of Sabra and Shatila (September 16-18, 1982). The Pope reacted by saying that there were “no sufficient words to condemn such crimes, which are repulsive to the human and Christian conscience”²⁵.

In the subsequent years John Paul II on many occasions addressed the issue of the Palestinian-Israeli dispute. During his visit to Austria in June 1988, the Pope was calling again for equal dignity for the Israeli Jews and the Palestinians, pointing out that the Palestinians had a right to a homeland “like every other nation, according to international law”²⁶. In the years of Intifada, the West Bank and Gaza Strip mass resistance to Israeli occupation, the Pope wanted violence to end despite the fact that he understood well the frustrations of the Palestinian people. In 1990 he spoke once again:

¹⁹ A. Kreutz, *The Vatican and the Palestinians...*, p. 120.

²⁰ See: G. E. Irani, *The Holy See and the Lebanese War, [in:] The Papacy and the Middle East...*, p. 98-153.

²¹ „L’Osservatore Romano”, 7-8 June 1982, p. 17.

²² M. Parker, *Priest...*, p. 66.

²³ J. Kwinty recalls the issue in his book: *Man of the Century*, New York 1997, p. 456-457.

²⁴ About the existing conflict see: G. E. Irani, *The Papacy and the Middle East ...*, p. 141-145.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 144.

²⁶ “Globe and Mail”, 25 June 1988, p. 14.

Let us ask the Lord to inspire in leaders a real will for peace so that, with help of the international community, the Palestinian people and Israeli people may obtain the justice and security they aspire to²⁷.

In January 1991 his plea for peace intensified:

For decades now the Palestinian people has been sorely tried and treated unjustly. Here are the people who demand to be heard, although some groups have chosen to make their point by methods that are unacceptable and worthy of condemnation²⁸.

His Easter 1991 message continued along the same lines:

Lend an ear, humanity of our time, to the long – ignored aspirations of oppressed peoples such as the Palestinians, the Lebanese, the Kurds, who claim the right to exist with dignity, justice and freedom²⁹.

John Paul II's firm position concerning the Palestinian – Israeli dispute was followed by his increasing contacts with Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon, Syria and Sudan³⁰. Even officially strictly Islamic Saudi Arabia sought and exchanged political and religious envoys with the Vatican³¹. In his efforts toward a Middle East settlement and protection of Palestinian rights, in 1988, the Pope met with King Hussein of Jordan (February 1)³² and President Mubarak of Egypt (February 5)³³. Furthermore, on February 4, Monsignor Achille Silvestrini, a key member of the Vatican's policy staff, held talks with Farouk Khaddoumi³⁴, regarded as the foreign minister of the PLO. Moreover, in January 1988, in a symbolic gesture of support and recognition for the Palestinian people in general and a small Christian community in the Holy Land in particular, John Paul II appointed a Palestinian priest, Rev. Michel Sabbah as Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem 1988³⁵. After the PLO's decision to explicitly accept Israel's right to exist and reject all forms of terrorism, the Pope received Yasser Arafat in audience on December 24, 1988³⁶. On that occasion, John Paul II once again expressed the hope that:

Both people would soon see to beginning of understanding and peace, which put an end finally to their suffering and their fears³⁷.

²⁷ M. Parker, *Priest...*, p. 67.

²⁸ *The Holy Father's address to the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See (12 January, 1991)*, "Islamochristiana" 1991, vol. 17, p. 277-278.

²⁹ *Pope John Paul II's speech about the situation in the Middle East before praying Angelus* (3 March, 1991), "Islamochristiana" 1991, vol. 17, p. 286.

³⁰ See: J. B. Hehir, *The Catholic Church and the Middle East: Policy and Diplomacy*, [in:] *Vatican, Islam and the Middle East...*, p. 109-125.

³¹ On the visit of the Saudi *ulema* (Muslim religious scholars) to the Vatican see: M. A. Boissard, *La Saint-Siege et la Palestine*, "Relations Internationales" 1981, vol. 28, p. 453.

³² "L'Osservatore Romano", 4 January 1988, p. 11.

³³ "L'Osservatore Romano", 8 February 1988, p. 20.

³⁴ A. Kreutz, *Vatican and the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict...*, p. 162.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 162.

³⁶ John Paul II's subsequent meetings with Arafat: 6 April 1990, 2 September 1995, 12 December 1998. During his pilgrimage to the Holy Land Pope was received by Arafat in the Palestinian Authority (22 March 2000).

³⁷ *The Holy See at the Service of Peace: Pope John Paul II's Addresses to the Diplomatic Corps (1978-1988)*, Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Vatican 1988, p. 71.

Consistency, pragmatism and a clear view of long-standing goals shaped the papal diplomacy in the Middle East. Therefore, the Vatican support for Palestinians had always been balanced with concerns for Israel and the world's Jewish community, relations with whom were regarded by Church leaders as vitally important. John Paul II was well aware that apart from religious traditions and the actual control of Christian and Muslim Holy Places, Israel possessed two other strong advantages: its indisputable position as the strongest military power in the area, and its special religious and cultural ties with Christians in the West. By contrast, the divided Arab states had comparatively little bargaining power against the Israelis.

Since the beginning of his pontificate, John Paul II frequently displayed his sympathies towards the Jews and their cause. As the head of the Roman Catholic Church, fully committed to dialogue with Judaism³⁸, the Pope made many official and unofficial contacts with both Jewish spiritual leaders and Israeli politicians³⁹. Moreover, in a symbolic gesture of his recognition, sympathy and support for the Jews and their cause, on April 12, 1986, he became the first Pope ever to visit the Rome synagogue⁴⁰. While the distance between the Vatican and the synagogue was only a few kilometers, as the Chief Rabbi Elio Toaff remarked, it had taken "two thousand years" to be acknowledged by a Roman Pope.

The early 1990's witnessed many dramatic developments in the Middle East. The situation in the region had changed radically in 1991 with Iraq's defeat by the allied coalition in the Persian Gulf War. John Paul II forcefully opposed the United States intervention. The Pope sent fervent appeals to President Bush and President Saddam Hussein⁴¹ to discontinue the fighting taking the view that the Western powers had not really attempted to negotiate a peaceful solution with Iraq long after the invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, before launching Desert Storm. He said:

True friends of peace know that now more than ever is the time for dialogue, for negotiations and for affirming the primacy of international law. Yes, peace is still possible: war would be a decline for all humanity⁴².

On January 17, 1991, during the audience for the officials of the Roman Vicariate, John Paul II asserted:

War is not the answer... I pray that the experience of this first day of conflict will be enough to make people understand the need for the rights of all peoples in the region to be made the subject of a particular commitment on the part of the international community. It is a question of problems the solu-

³⁸ See: E. J. Fisher, L. Klenicki (eds), *Pope John Paul II on Jews and Judaism: 1979-1986*, Washington 1987.

³⁹ T. Szulc, *Pope John Paul II: the Biography*, New York 1995, p. 450.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 451.

⁴¹ *Pope John Paul II's appeal to both President George Bush and President Saddam Hussein (15 January, 1991)*, "Islamochristiana" 1991, vol. 17, p. 280-281.

⁴² *The Holy Father's address to the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See (12 January 1991)*, "Islamochristiana" 1991, vol. 17, p. 278.

tion of which can only be sought in an international meeting at which all the interested parties are present and cooperate frankly and calmly⁴³.

In January and February of 1991, John Paul II made several appeals for an end to the war in the Persian Gulf, addressing both the leaders and the international community. Once again he referred to the principles of *Nostra Aetate*:

Let us pray again for and with all believers belonging to the three religions which have their historical roots in the Middle East: Jews, Christians and Muslims. Faith in the same God must not be the cause for conflict and rivalry, but a commitment to overcome the existing contrasts by dialogue and negotiations⁴⁴.

In the aftermath of the war, when, due to the initiative of the United States Israel and Jordan, the Palestine Liberation Organization decided to participate, for the first time, in Middle East peace process negotiations, John Paul II became an even more active participant in the diplomacy of the region. The Vatican's vision of the establishment of some kind of a peaceful accommodation between Israelis and Palestinians, an accommodation which would be acceptable to both and fulfill the criteria of justice became the priority in the Pope's diplomatic efforts. With pragmatism, persistency and determination, John Paul II set in motion the process leading to the Holy See's diplomatic recognition of Israel and subsequently the relations with the PLO.

The informal negotiations began in November 1991 with the help of the Israeli ambassador to Italy⁴⁵. In July 1992, a special Holy See – Israel Bilateral Commission was formed to negotiate the establishment of diplomatic relations. The process went relatively slowly. There were many difficult unsettled issues, such as the status of Jerusalem and the situation of the Palestinians. However, little by little, progress was made. The Labor party had won the June elections in Israel and Yitzhak Rabin became the Prime Minister. On October 23, during his audience with John Paul II, Shimon Peres, the new foreign minister, formally invited the Pope to visit Israel. However, a year elapsed before an agreement was reached on establishing diplomatic relations.

Meanwhile, on September 12, 1993, Israeli Prime Minister Rabin and PLO Chairman Arafat had signed an agreement at the White House in Washington on partial Palestinian self – rule in the Occupied Territories. This fact gave a new impulse to the Holy See-Israeli negotiations. On September 23, John Paul II received in Castel Gandolfo the chief Ashkenazi Rabbi of Israel, Meyer Lau. During the audience, the Pope rejoiced, "Today my visit to Jerusalem is nearer than ever"⁴⁶. Finally, on December 30, 1993, Israel and the Holy See signed an agreement in

⁴³ *War is not an answer* (Pope John II's audience for the officials of the Roman Vicariate, 17 January, 1991), "Islamochristiana" 1991, vol. 17, p. 281-282.

⁴⁴ *Pope John Paul II's Angelus appeal for an end to the war* (27 January, 1991), "Islamochristiana" 1991, vol. 17, p. 283.

⁴⁵ Tad Szulc recalls the process of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Holy See and Israel in his book, *Pope John Paul II ...*, p. 449-154.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 453.

Jerusalem establishing full diplomatic relations. Afterwards, John Paul II explained his decision. He said:

It must be understood that Jews, who for two thousand years were dispersed among the nations of the world, had decided to return to the land of their ancestors. This is their right. And this right is recognized even by those who look upon the nation of Israel with an unsympathetic eye. The Holy See also recognized this right from the outset, and the act of establishing diplomatic relations with Israel is simply an international affirmation of this relationship⁴⁷.

As pointed out previously, in all his statements related to the Palestinian – Israeli dispute, John Paul II always clearly affirmed his recognition of the political rights of both the Jews and the Palestinians. Therefore, the establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel was followed by the Pope's efforts to give official recognition to the Palestine Liberation Organization, in its capacity as official representative of the Palestinian people. During the 1980's, the Vatican had already made several contacts with the Palestinian authorities⁴⁸. In the early 1990's there were series of talks, with the principal purpose of strengthening mutual cooperation between the Holy See and the Palestinian Liberation Organization. Finally, on October 25, 1994, according to the *communiqué* agreed upon by the Holy See and the PLO, "it was decided to give the already long-existing and fruitful working contacts a permanent and official character"⁴⁹. Subsequently, the PLO opened an office of representation at the Holy See. The Apostolic Nuncio in Tunisia was appointed as liaison with the leaders of the PLO. Furthermore, as stated in the *communiqué*:

The two parties have also committed themselves to cooperate, each with its own means and according to its own characteristics and responsibilities, in preserving the religious and cultural values which mark the people of the region, and which properly belong to the Holy Land and especially to the Holy City of Jerusalem⁵⁰.

The Vatican's task to establish diplomatic ties with both the Jews and the Palestinians was accomplished. In January 1996, on the occasion of the exchange of greetings with the Ambassadors accredited to the Holy See, the Pope in a very simply way concluded his difficult diplomatic efforts. He said:

Today we cannot but rejoice to see here, for the first time, the representative of the Palestinian people. For more than a year, the Holy See has enjoyed diplomatic relations with the state of Israel... It is the eloquent sign that the Middle East has resolutely taken the path of peace proclaimed to mankind by the Child born in Bethlehem⁵¹.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 453.

⁴⁸ A. Kreuzt, *The Vatican and the Palestinians...*, p. 124.

⁴⁹ T. Szulc, *Pope John Paul II...*, p. 457.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 458.

⁵¹ *John Paul II's address to the Diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See (13 January, 1996)*, "Islamochristiana" 1997, vol. 23, p. 250-251.

As for the issue of Jerusalem and the status of the Holy Places, that was the focal point of John Paul II's diplomacy in the Middle East since the beginning of his pontificate.

In every major religion, a "holy place" has helped men and women define their own place and indeed their own importance in the world. Jerusalem has become that defining place for adherents of the three religions of Abraham⁵². However, the city has been not only a symbol of God but also a deeply rooted part of Jewish, Christian and Muslim identity. The strong emotions released by the Jewish repossession of the Western Wall in 1967 and the longings of the Palestinians for Jerusalem are modern manifestations of the same pattern of passionate attachment strengthened by prior dispossession. As a result, Jerusalem has been such a deeply embedded ideal that the objectivity has become virtually impossible.

Therefore, the sensitive issue of Jerusalem was a crucial test of John Paul II's diplomatic efforts in the Middle East, a test of his ability to prove that the Vatican was capable of balancing the interests of the Church with those of the other two monotheistic religions.

The Holy See's policy towards Jerusalem has, over the past century, evolved from one of supremacy to one of fostering ecumenism and interfaith relations⁵³. Until 1947, the Vatican defended the preeminence of Catholic rights and privileges in the Holy Land. After 1948, the Holy See called for the internationalization of Jerusalem. Following the 1967 war, the Papacy reassessed its policy and advocated a special status of the city with international guarantees. The fact that no single nation should control the city remained the fundamental principle guiding the Vatican's policy toward Jerusalem. In the early 1970's the concern of the Papacy to maintain and preserve the *unique* and the *universal* character of Jerusalem led to many controversies with the Israelis⁵⁴. Despite this, in 1974, in his apostolic letter *Nobis in Animo*, Paul VI reaffirmed the Vatican's position on the *universal* character of Jerusalem and called for a peaceful coexistence between the various communities and groups living in the Middle East. He explained:

The continuation of the state of tension in the Middle East... constitutes a serious and constant danger... We are thinking especially of Jerusalem... towards which turn more intensely in these days the thoughts of Christ's followers, and of which, on a par with Jews and Muslims they ought to feel fully *citizens*... The Christian presence in the Holy Land, together with that of Jews and Muslims, can be a coefficient of harmony and peace⁵⁵.

With regards to the issues of Jerusalem, John Paul II consistently followed the policy of his predecessor. In June 1980, one month before the Israeli government enacted its *basic law* to formalize the annexation of Jerusalem, *L'Osservatore Romano* published the Vatican's detailed statement presenting its stand on the question of Jerusalem. The Holy See requested:

⁵² See: K. Armstrong, *Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths*, New York 1996.

⁵³ G. E. Irani, *The Papacy and the Middle East...*, p. 77-99.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 79.

⁵⁵ "L'Osservatore Romano", 6 April 1976, p. 8.

- 1) that the overall character of Jerusalem as sacred heritage shared by the three monotheistic religions guaranteed by appropriate measures;
- 2) that religious freedom in all its aspects be safeguarded for them;
- 3) that the complex of rights acquired by the various communities over the shrines and the centers for spirituality, study, welfare be protected;
- 4) that the continuance and development of religious, educational, and social activity be ensured;
- 5) that this be actuated with equality of treatment for all three religions;
- 6) that this to be achieved through an “appropriate juridical safeguard” that does not derive from the will of only one of the parties interested⁵⁶.

Once again the Holy See pointed out that the “significance and value of Jerusalem are such as to surpass the interest of any simple state”. However, while reaffirming its opposition to any exclusive control of the city by any single state, under the circumstances the Holy See was willing to accept the sovereignty of whatever “power”, in this case Israel, provided that an international body guarantees the special status of the Holy City.

In the subsequent years John Paul II’s position on Jerusalem remained along the same lines. Its essence could be found in his apostolic letter, *Redemptio Anno*⁵⁷. In that letter the Pope once again reaffirmed the Vatican’s call to maintain and preserve the *unique* and *universal* character of the Holy City. However, he elaborated on the symbolic meaning of the City even further, stating that Jerusalem with its various communities should become the *fulcrum* of a possible resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli dispute, the unifying and pacifying religious element between Arabs (Christians and Muslims) and Israelis (Jews). The Pope called on “all the peoples of the Middle East” to discover again “the true sense of their history” in order “to be able to overcome the tragic events in which they are involved”. The Pope concluded:

The question of Jerusalem is fundamental for a just peace in the Middle East. It is my conviction that the religious identity of the city and particularly the common tradition of monotheistic faiths can pave the way to promote harmony among all those who in different ways consider the Holy City their own⁵⁸.

In the 1990s his position concerning Jerusalem didn’t change. In all the statements related to the Middle East, John Paul II expressed his deep conviction that the hope for real peace in this area could prove ephemeral if a just and adequate solution would not be found to the particular problem of Jerusalem. On January 13, 1996, while addressing the Diplomats accredited to the Holy See, John Paul II once again pointed out that:

The religious and universal dimension of the Holy City demands a commitment on the part of the whole international community, in order to ensure that the City preserves its uniqueness and retains its living character. The Holy Places, dear to the three monotheistic religions, would lose much of

⁵⁶ “L’Osservatore Romano”, 1 July 1980, p. 5.

⁵⁷ “L’Osservatore Romano”, 30 April 1984, p. 7.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

their significance if they were not permanently surrounded by active communities of Jews, Christians and Muslims, enjoying true freedom of conscience and religion, and developing their own religious, educational and social activities⁵⁹.

The Pope's long struggle for dialogue and peace in the Middle East resulted in some positive changes, including the establishment of the diplomatic relations between the Holy See and Israel and then with the Palestinian Autonomy. All that together with the increased diplomatic contacts between the Vatican and the Arab states eventually led to the easing the tensions between the Palestinians and the Israelis. Therefore, John Paul II decided to fulfil his dream and in the year 2000, the year of the Two Thousandth Anniversary of the Birth of Jesus Christ, he went for the pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

The history of John Paul II's pontificate reveals that the pilgrimage to the Holy Land was the one that was "postponed" for more than twenty years and "required" the longest preparations. The Pope had already expressed his wish to go there in December 1978, shortly after his election when addressed the people gathered at the St. Peter's Square in the following words:

How I wish I could go to the land of my Lord and Redeemer!
This was and is my greatest desire ever since the beginning of my Pontificate...
But, regretfully, I must at least for the present, forget this pilgrimage!

The subsequent years of his pontificate proved why the Pope had to postpone that important pilgrimage for such a long time. John Paul II engaged himself in a tremendous task of developing the interreligious dialogue in the Middle East and promoting a peaceful coexistence in the region, thus "preparing a better climate" for it.

On March 20, 2000, during the welcome ceremony at the airport in Amman, while referring to the long tradition of a harmonious coexistence between the Christians and the Muslims in the Hashemid Kingdom, John Paul II strongly pointed out that only the development of a sincere dialogue between the three monotheistic religions would lead to the long-lasting peace settlement in the area. Three days later, in Jerusalem, during the interreligious meeting at the Notre Dame Pontifical Institute, the Pope elaborated on the matter even further. He said:

For all of us Jerusalem, as its name indicates, is the "City of Peace". Perhaps no other place in the world communicates the sense of transcendence as divine election that we perceive in her stones and monuments, and in the witness of the three religions living side by side within her walls. Not everything has been easy in this co-existence. But we must find in our respective religious traditions the wisdom and the superior motivation to ensure the triumph of mutual understanding and cordial respect. If the various religious communities in the Holy Land succeed in living and working together in friendship and harmony, this will be of enormous benefit not only to them but also to the whole cause of peace in this region⁶⁰.

⁵⁹ Address on His Holiness Pope John Paul II accredited to the Holy See for the traditional exchange of New Year Greetings (January 13, 1996), www.vatican.va.

⁶⁰ Address of John Paul II at the Interreligious Meeting at the Notre Dame pontifical Institute (Jerusalem, March 23, 2000), www.vatican.va.

However, the first years of the twenty first century proved that the political situation in the Middle East became more complicated again. With the Events of September 11, 2001, and subsequently the American intervention in Afghanistan, the tensions in the region had risen again. The Palestinian-Israeli dispute had entered a very difficult stage. John Paul II appalled by these dangerous developments engaged himself again urging the International Community on many occasions to undertake some initiatives. In January 2002, while addressing the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See, the Pope said:

The Holy Land is still, through man's fault, a land of fire and blood. ... Weapons and bloody attacks will never be the right means for making a political statement to the other side.... As I have already stated on many occasions, only respect for others and their legitimate aspirations, the application of international law, the evacuation of the occupied territories and an internationally guaranteed *special status for the most Holy Places* in Jerusalem can bring about a beginning of pacification in that part of the world and break the hellish cycle of hatred and vengeance⁶¹.

As mention previously, John Paul II always rejected the use of military means in resolving political conflicts. Therefore, the American plans for the terrorism preventing war with Iraq were strongly opposed by the Pope⁶². In his diplomatic struggle to avoid the war the Holy Father met with the German Minister of Foreign Affairs Yoshka Fisher, the Secretary General of the United Nations Kofi Anan, the Iraqi Minister of Foreign Affairs Tariq 'Aziz, the British Prime Minister Tony Blair, and his special envoys went with the letters to both presidents, i.e., George Bush and Saddam Hussain. The issue of *L'Osservatore Romano*, the official Vatican daily newspaper from the 24th-25th of February, had an unusual first page. Three big letters composing the word *mai* (never) took the big part of it. Above the title it was written "Never one against the other", and under the title "Never terrorism and logic of war". The rest of the page was taken by text of the Sunday morning Angelus prayer. The word *mai* that John Paul II repeated four times became the slogan of anti-war demonstrations. Despite the fact that president Bush decided not to take into consideration the Pope's decisive stand against the American military intervention in Iraq, the Holy See's diplomatic efforts to prevent it continued until the breakout of the war.

The Pope's Annual Message to the Diplomats and the International Community for the year 2004 once again confirmed his determination for the cause of peace. John Paul II said:

Peace is still threatened. The many attempts made by the Holy See to avoid the grievous war in Iraq are already known. Today what matters is that International Community help out the Iraqis, freed from an oppressive regime, in a condition to be able to take up their Country's reign again. ... The failure to solve the Palestinian-Israeli issue remains a permanent factor of destabilization for the whole region. I will never tire of repeating to the leaders of these two peoples: the choice of weapons

⁶¹ Address on His Holiness Pope John Paul II accredited to the Holy See for the traditional exchange of New Year Greetings (January 10, 2002), www.vatican.va.

⁶² For the complete story of John Paul II's diplomatic efforts to prevent the American intervention in Iraq see: J. Moskwa, *Prorok i polityk*, Warszawa 2003, p. 347-395.

and terrorism... leads nowhere. Respect for the legitimate aspirations of both parties, a return to the negotiating table and the concrete commitment of the International Community alone can be the first step towards a solution⁶³.

The Pope's active diplomatic involvement in the Middle East problems and his search for new means of a sincere dialogue between Christians, Jews and Muslims persistently continued until the end of his long pontificate, despite many setbacks and controversy. "What unites us Christians is much greater than what separates us", as John XXII used to say⁶⁴. These words were given by John Paul II a more universal meaning: What unites us Christians, Muslims and Jews, believers in one God, is much greater than what separates us. There is no doubt that the Pope's involvement in the Middle Eastern problems many times resulted in easing the existing tensions and opening the ways for peace negotiations in the region. One may say that his wisdom, patience, pragmatism, determination and the unbelievable will to continue, develop and promote a sincere interreligious *dialogue* caused that sometimes, even unbelievable, used to become possible.

The call for *dialogue* and *peace* in the Middle East was and remained fundamental for John Paul II's mission, and, as he said on March 26, 2000, it was always his great wish that "Jerusalem, the Holy City *par excellence*, the City filled with God's presence, would become the place of joy and peace⁶⁵."

Today this emotional appeal seems to be more important than ever.

⁶³ Address on His Holiness Pope John Paul II accredited to the Holy See for the traditional exchange of New Year Greetings (January 10, 2004), www.vatican.va.

⁶⁴ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, Toronto 1994, p. 146.

⁶⁵ J. Moskwa, *Prorok i polityk...*, p. 275.