A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF VATICAN RELATIONS WITH THE PALESTINIAN PEOPLE

1. Pontifical Mission for Palestine
Pope Pius XII established the Pontifical Mission for Palestine in 1949 in direct response to the tragedy of the Palestine refugees in the aftermath of the war in 1948. What began as a temporary agency of the Holy See to provide the unfortunate and the beleaguered Palestine refugees with food, clothing, shelter, and education became a permanent expression of the Vatican’s concern for the well-being of Muslims and Christians in the region.

“In this way, the Pontifical Mission is an eloquent expression of that ‘new culture of international solidarity and cooperation’ (Incarnationis Mysterium, #12) which is so necessary in the modern world, and which must be a hallmark of the new millennium. This shared responsibility for the well-being of all, especially on the part of the wealthier nations and of the private sector, is part of the deeper meaning of the Great Jubilee upon which we are about to embark (cf. ibid.) . . . I pray that you and all those associated with the work of the Mission will be renewed in faith and love as you seek ever better ways of helping those in need not only of material support but especially of opportunities for personal and social development. This is the surest path for establishing a true and lasting peace in the lives of the peoples of the Middle East.”
Message to the Pontifical Mission for Palestine, On Occasion of its 50th Anniversary, from Pope John Paul II, December 9, 1999

2. On February 15, 2000, the Vatican and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) signed the “Basic Agreement between the Holy See and the Palestine Liberation Organization” at Vatican City. That agreement declared, among other things, that “an equitable solution for the issue of Jerusalem, based on international resolutions, is fundamental for a just and lasting peace in the Middle East.” It also stated that the realization of “the inalienable national legitimate rights and aspirations of the Palestinian People” would be essential in solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

(The full text of the “Basic Agreement between the Holy See and the Palestine Liberation Organization” is available for reading at http://www.christusrex.org/www1/ofm/curr/TSnews14.html.)

3. Papal Visit
On Tuesday, March 21, 2000, while flying over the West Bank en route from Jordan to Israel, the pontiff sent a telegram of good wishes to Yasser Arafat, a papal recognition normally awarded only to heads of state. On Wednesday, March 22, 2000, Pope John Paul II was received by Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in the West Bank town of Bethlehem. He also kissed a golden bowl of Palestinian soil offered by a local boy and girl—again, a gesture normally reserved for sovereign states.

“No one can ignore how much the Palestinian people have had to suffer in recent decades. Your torment is before the eyes of the world . . . It has gone on too long . . . The Holy See has always recognized that the Palestinian people have the natural right to a homeland, and the right to be able to live in peace and tranquility with the other peoples of this area. In the international forum, my predecessors and I have repeatedly proclaimed that there would be no end to the sad conflict in the Holy Land without stable guarantees for the rights of all the peoples involved, on the basis of international law and the relevant United Nations resolutions and declarations.”
Pope John Paul II, Bethlehem, March 22, 2000

During this visit the Pope visited the Dheisheh refugee camp, located in Bethlehem, where over 10,000 refugees from the 1948 Mideast war live in cramped living conditions. His journey and his words brought worldwide attention to the situation of the Palestinian people and the justness of their cause.

“You have been deprived of many things, which represent basic needs of the human person: proper housing, health care, education and work. Above all you bear the sad memory of what you were forced to leave behind, not just material possessions, but your freedom, the closeness of relatives, and the familial surroundings and cultural traditions . . . My appeal is for greater international solidarity and the political will to meet this challenge . . . I appeal to political leaders to implement agreements already arrived at, and to go forward towards the peace for which all reasonable men and women yearn, to the justice to which they have an inalienable right.”
Pope John Paul II, Dheisheh refugee camp, March 22, 2000
4. Pope Receives Israeli and Palestinian Delegates to Promote Peace
Pope John Paul II met with Israel’s Deputy Foreign Minister, Rabbi Michael Melchior, and the Minister of State of the Palestinian Authority, Sheikh Talal Sidr. He publicly reaffirmed the Holy See’s commitment to helping bring an end to violence in the Middle East.

“We are all saddened by the daily instances of violence and death in Israel and the Palestinian Territories . . . Our mission as men and women of religion impels us to pray for peace, to proclaim peace, and to do everything in our power to help bring an end to the bloodshed . . . I reiterate the firm determination of the Catholic Church to work for a just peace. May Almighty God bless your efforts to foster reconciliation and trust between all the beloved people of the Holy Land.”

Pope John Paul II, March 13, 2002

“...the immediate cessation of all acts of violence.” The resolution speaks of “a region where two states, Israel and Palestine, live side-by-side within secure and recognized borders.” The council voted 14-0 to approve the resolution, with Syria abstaining.

Discussion Questions:
What stance has the Vatican taken towards Palestinians since 1949? How is this consistent with Catholic Social Teaching?

In the “Basic Agreement between the Holy See and the Palestine Liberation Organization,” what is listed as essential in solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

What specific actions did Pope John Paul II take in the year 2000 that indicated his support of the creation of a Palestinian State?

What does the Pope have to say about United Nations resolutions and declarations? Have these resolutions been respected by the parties involved in this conflict?

What human rights does the Pope mention?

What does the Pope say about international solidarity? What does he say about the “new culture of international solidarity and cooperation?”