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Israeli Ambassador to Holy See on papal discourse to diplomats

(Vatican Radio) Israel's new ambassador to the Holy See, Zion Evrony says his country desires peace and is willing to make "huge" sacrifices to achieve it. Evrony encourages the Palestinian Authority to return to the negotiating table "without preconditions."

The Israeli diplomat presented his credentials to Pope Benedict XVI in September 2012, becoming his country's sixth ambassador to the Holy See. He was formerly Israel's ambassador to Ireland (2006-2010).

Ambassador Evrony spoke to Vatican Radio's Tracey McClure about Pope Benedict XVI's January 7th address to diplomats accredited to the Holy See.

In that speech, Pope Benedict expressed deep concern about the Holy Land:

"Following Palestine's recognition as a Non-Member Observer State of the United Nations, I again express the hope that, with the support of the international community, Israelis and Palestinians will commit themselves to peaceful coexistence within the framework of two sovereign states, where respect for justice and the legitimate aspirations of the two peoples will be preserved and guaranteed."

"We share the Pope's call for peace, peace with our neighbours, especially with the Palestinians as is our desire and our dream," says Ambassador Evrony. "The best way to achieve it is through direct negotiations without any precondition, negotiations between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. We strongly believe that the international community must do everything possible to convince the Palestinians to come to the negotiating table and talk with us directly and not through the United Nations. This is the only way to achieve peace."

When asked how much Israel is willing to sacrifice to implement a two state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as desired by the Pope, Ambassador Evrony says:

"Indeed, I believe that the ultimate solution is the existence of two states living side by side in peace: the State of Israel that already exists of course is the homeland of the Jewish people, and the future, future State of Palestine as a homeland of the Palestinian people. Of course, once negotiations start, both sides will have to compromise. Israel is ready to make huge sacrifices for the sake of peace. But the...obstacle is that the Palestinians have refused to come

to the negotiating table and you cannot really achieve peace without negotiating with the other side. Right now, this is the main obstacle to peace.”

On the subject of Jerusalem, which Pope Benedict described as a “prophecy, a city of peace and not division,” Ambassador Evrony reiterates his country’s position claiming the city as the “united” capital of Israel. “Jerusalem of course will be one of the issues that will have to be resolved - the future of Jerusalem - through negotiations.”

At the same time, Palestinians claim East Jerusalem for their capital.

“They have their position, we have ours,” Evrony says. “But the only way to come to an agreement is to negotiate. But once you refuse to come to the negotiating table, there’s no way that progress can be made.”

Diplomatic relations between Israel and the Holy See were established in 1994 under Pope John Paul II. Ambassador Evrony describes relations today between the two sides as “good.”

“They are based on mutual trust. I hope they will continue to improve,” he says, recalling that next year will mark the twentieth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations. “I think it will be an opportunity to celebrate but also to think about ways to strengthen and deepen our relations in many areas such as stronger cultural ties, academic ties – to think together how we can encourage more tourism to Israel to visit the Holy sites, and to work together to fight anti-semitism.”

In late 1993 the Holy See and Israel signed the Fundamental Agreement dealing with the property rights and tax exemptions of the Church in Israeli territory. Negotiations between the two sides continue with the aim of resolving outstanding juridical, tax and property issues. Where do the negotiations stand now and how close are the two sides to signing an accord?

Ambassador Evrony expresses hope that an accord will be reached soon: “nearly twenty years after the signing of the Fundamental Agreement between Israel and the Holy See, I hope that the negotiations are nearing conclusion. We recently have solved and overcome some important obstacles but there is some work to be done before we can finally sign it. (The two sides) will be meeting again in a few weeks in Jerusalem to continue another round of negotiations and hopefully make more progress towards the conclusion of these negotiations... I think we are getting there but there are still a few obstacles that we will have to overcome.”

In this extended interview with Tracey McClure, Ambassador Evrony says local Christians in the Holy Land can play a role in the peace process by “being part of interreligious dialogue...to contribute to better understanding between Israelis and Palestinians. I think that interreligious dialogue can help abolish stereotypes on both sides and help create more trust which is missing right now.”

The Israeli Ambassador also draws a comparison with Northern Ireland “where religious leaders contributed to better understanding and tolerance between the two sides.”

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