

Pope Calls for 'Sovereign' Palestinian State in Bethlehem Tour

Continuing his week-long pilgrimage to the Holy Land, Pope Benedict XVI on Wednesday called for a "sovereign Palestinian homeland" and identified with Palestinian "suffering" during a one-day visit to Bethlehem and other parts of the West Bank.

The pontiff stood alongside Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas as he delivered his strongest public support yet for Palestinian statehood.

"Mr. President, the Holy See supports the right of your people to a sovereign Palestinian homeland in the land of your forefathers, secure and at peace with its neighbors, within internationally recognized borders," the pontiff said. "I know how much you have suffered and continue to suffer as a result of the turmoil that has afflicted this land for decades," he added.

From there, the pope made his way to the Church of the Nativity, the site revered as the birthplace of Jesus, where hundreds of people gathered for morning mass in Manger Square. "Please be assured of my solidarity with you in the immense work of rebuilding which now lies ahead, and my prayers that the [Israeli] embargo will soon be lifted," he told the crowd. He also urged young Palestinians to "have the courage to resist any temptation you may feel to resort to acts of violence or terrorism."

Bethlehem's dwindling Christian community expressed hope that the pontiff's visit will discourage the Christian exodus from the town of Jesus' birth. Christians in Bethlehem and elsewhere in the Palestinian territories come under harassment and persecution from the Palestinian Muslim majority, who has

limited economic opportunities by refusing to end their conflict with Israel.

Speaking at the Garden of Gethsemane on Tuesday, Benedict lamented the high rates of emigration from the Holy Land by indigenous Christians. The pontiff chose the traditional site where the Bible says Jesus prayed to God for guidance the night before his crucifixion to call on “authorities to respect, to support and to value the Christian presence here.”

The pope later visited a Palestinian refugee camp as well as Israel’s security barrier, which he called a symbol of the “stalemate” in Israeli-Palestinian relations.

On Thursday, the pope will hold a mass in Nazareth in northern Israel, where Jesus grew up, as well as meet with Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. The Galilee region is where most of Israel’s 154,000 Christians live.