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Benedict XVI intends to visit Israel in 2007

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 16, 2006 All Things Catholic

A long-time veteran of Jewish-Catholic relations told *NCR* this week that the Vatican has confirmed Benedict XVI's intention to visit Israel in 2007, though no date has yet been established for the trip.

According to this source, Archbishop Giovanni Lajolo relayed the pope's intention in conversations with Israeli officials.

Lajolo, this source said, expressed two "desires" with regard to the prospective visit. The first is that long-running negotiations between Israel and the Vatican over the tax and juridical status of church institutions in Israel will be resolved before it happens. The second is that no violence will occur during the pope's trip, to avoid it being "instrumentalized" to serve the political ends of any party to the Middle East conflict.

According to this source, however, Lajolo said these were "desires" rather than conditions that must be satisfied before the trip can take place.

Though no itinerary has been discussed, when Benedict XVI met with Israeli President Moshe Katsav last November, he expressed interest in seeing Meggido, a site in northern Israel where archeologists recently unearthed what is believed to be the oldest Christian church yet discovered. Those remains date to the end of the third century.

The veteran of Jewish-Catholic relations said it is also difficult to imagine that Benedict would travel to Israel and not visit Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem.

If it materializes, Benedict's trip to Israel would be his third major encounter with Jews, following his visit to the synagogue in Cologne last August and his recent trip to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

The source said he sees a logic to these choices. The Cologne synagogue, he said, is a symbol of *Kristallnacht*, the outbreak of anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany that signalled the first stirrings of the Holocaust; Auschwitz-Birkenau represents the deepest horrors of the Holocaust; and Israel symbolizes the rebirth of the Jewish people in their own state.

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This source said that Benedict's recent visit to Auschwitz has added new ambivalence to what was already a complex relationship between Christians and Jews. Many Jews, he said, were disappointed that there was not

more emphasis on the specifically Jewish dimension of the Holocaust.

As one small but telling example, the source pointed to booklets distributed prior to the pope's arrival, which provided background in Polish on the death camps. He said that a word in the booklet had been covered with white-out and something new written in red ink. The point concerned the number of Poles who died at Auschwitz-Birkenau; originally, he said, the booklet said 150,000, but this had been covered over and 75,000 written in its place. Someone, he said, had made an adjustment at the last moment, but the earlier version reflected what this observer saw as a deliberate attempt to downplay the overwhelmingly Jewish character of the victims who perished at the camp.

This observer also said some Jews were angered by the pope's positive mention of St. Maximilian Kolbe, a Catholic priest who died in Auschwitz when he volunteered to take the place of a condemned man. Yet some of Kolbe's writings also contain approving references to the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, an infamous anti-Semitic tract, which many Jews see as part of the cultural background of the Holocaust.

In that context, this source said, Benedict's comments during a visit to Israel, should it occur, would be especially scrutinized in the Jewish world.

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