

## Israel-Vatican legal-fiscal negotiations nearing conclusion



*Benedict XVI with Mordechai Lewy*

*Significant progress was made towards the conclusion of the Fundamental Agreement, during this week's plenary meeting between the Holy See and Israel*

LISA PALMIERI BILLIG, VATICAN INSIDER, 14 JUNE 2012  
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“We’ve reached the end of the tunnel. Now there’s nothing left that can’t be overcome” said Israel’s Ambassador to the Holy See, Mordechai (“Motti”) Lewy to *Vatican Insider*, referring to the conclusions of this week’s plenary meeting of the Bilateral Permanent Working Commission between the Holy See and the State of Israel, held at the Vatican.

His words reflected a glowing appraisal shared by all 24 members of the two delegations. The Joint Communiqué spoke of “significant progress made towards the conclusion of the Agreement” and also acknowledged “the exemplary service” of H.E. Mgr. Antonio Franco, Apostolic Nuncio in Israel and Ambassador Mordechai Lewy “on occasion of their retirement.”

Nearly 20 years after the Fundamental Agreement that ushered in diplomatic relations between Israel and Vatican State, it seems negotiations regarding a remaining legal and fiscal accord is nearing conclusion. The final paragraph, containing definitions of delicate mechanisms for settling disputes, reportedly only needs some “smoothing out.”

At the reception organized in Ambassador Lewy’s home by his wife, Rivka, (*Rebecca* in Hebrew), whom Lewy calls “my chief advisor and supporter, since I am the only diplomat in this Embassy – a unique situation for Israel”, warm tributes were paid to Ambassador Lewy and Mgr. Franco, whose devoted commitments were considered by the respective Deputy Foreign Ministers and delegation chairmen, Mgr. Ettore Balestrero and Danny Ayalon, as the primary cause for progress in negotiations.

The Vatican delegation's Secretary, Fr. Giovanni Caputa, told *Vatican Insider* that the content of the final paragraph of the legal and fiscal agreement had been successfully “clarified”, and “We now await the Hebrew translation of the English text”. He hopes the next scheduled plenary (December 6 in Israel) will **be the final act of nearly two decades of negotiations, with signatures by the two delegation heads, Israeli**

**government ratification (by the Cabinet or the Knesset), and strategies for implementation following informal consultations with legal advisors of Israel's Justice, Finance and Foreign Affairs departments.**

Moshe Golan of Israel's Justice Ministry stressed the "serious political, historic and diplomatic reasons for this agreement between two independent States. It will solidify our new, positive relationship with the Holy See which represents approximately 1.2 billion people worldwide, ending centuries of a difficult and painful common history."

At conclusion of the reception, Ambassador Lewy announced the good news that Holy See travel documents will no longer require visas. "But now we must inform everyone in Israel, especially border officials!" he said.