

A witch's brew of religious hatred

Pope John Paul II named a new patriarch of Jerusalem this week, and thereby sent a subtle but powerful political message to the world.

As well, the appointment of Patriarch Michel Sabbah by one of the most eminent popes since the Renaissance gave a fascinating glimpse of the veiled conflict over Palestine between Israel and the Vatican, a subject usually discussed only behind closed doors.

Sabbah is the first Arab to be patriarch of Jerusalem since the Crusades. Equally important, he is a Palestinian. Though most outsiders think all of the 4.7 million Palestinians are Moslem, a sizable minority is Catholic or Orthodox. Interestingly, some of the most militant Palestinian leaders are Christians.

To no surprise, both Israel and the Vatican have worked hard to play down this fact. Neither side wants to see the chronic Palestinian problem take on the added dimension of a Christian-Jewish conflict. Yet in spite of such discretion, animosity between Israel and the Vatican frequently breaks out into the open. We can expect to see more.

In response to the December rising by Palestinians in Gaza, the West Bank and Israel, Pope John Paul went public with a strongly worded plea for the recognition of Palestinian rights. John Paul's remarks came just when Israel was brutally suppressing demonstrating Palestinians. It was a message heard by everyone in the Mideast: The Pope raised up St. Peter's staff as defender of the Palestinian people, Christian and Moslem alike, at a time when the rest of the world had turned its back on them.

In doing so, the Pope was continuing the Vatican's policy of supporting a Palestinian homeland and the internationalization of the Old City of Jerusalem which

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has been annexed by Israel.

More important, the Holy See has steadfastly refused to formally recognize the state of Israel, while giving de facto recognition to the PLO.

This Vatican policy infuriates Israel and the North American Jewish community. In private, many supporters of Israel speak of the Vatican as an enemy second only to the PLO and believe it to be infused with deep and persistent anti-Semitism.

This bad blood dates back to the 1930s, a time, charge many Jews, when the Vatican actively abetted the Nazis or, at best, turned a blind eye to Hitler's crimes. During the 1950s, relations between North American Jews and Catholics were so hostile that writer Peter Viereck neatly coined the phrase: "Catholic-baiting is the anti-Semitism of the left."

Frequent examples of Catholic-Jewish animosity can regularly be seen. Revelations about the Church helping Nazis flee Europe or Pope Pius' alleged favoritism of the extreme right often appear whenever the Vatican takes a strong stand on the Mideast.

Conversely, whenever Jews attack the Vatican, some of the more retrograde Catholics are heard to mutter about the "crucifiers of Christ" or how Jews cannot ever gain salvation.

For good reason, Catholic and Jewish leaders have labored to muzzle their hot-headed co-religionists and seek, as well, to improve strained relations between the two religious communities. But old angers run deep and Jews cannot forget that many of the same people who ran Nazi death camps also went regularly to mass.

Sadly, the uprooted Palestinians and their heirs had to pay the price of Europe's monstrous sins. By defending them, Pope John Paul has unfortunately become a target of Jewish anger.

Old religious hatreds are now being updated. In the past, the struggle between Palestinians and Israelis was largely regarded as a political conflict. That was until outrage against Israel spread across the non-Arab, Moslem world.

The terms "Jew" and "Israeli" have now become synonymous in the Moslem world, an evil and disturbing portent of growing anti-Semitism. Similarly, anti-Moslem feeling has been whipped up in the West by supporters of Israel, as the terms "Shiite," "terrorist," "fundamentalist" and "Palestinian" all blur into one negative image.

Add the bitter legacy of Catholic-Jewish tensions to this witch's brew and what you have is a frightening descent into medieval religious hatreds, spiked by the potent liquor of modern geopolitical conflicts. With the added danger, of course, that the poison of these hatreds could easily flow back to North America and awaken demons supposedly long ago put to rest.

All the more reason, then, that some solution must quickly be found to the Israeli-Palestinian problem before it turns even uglier. Such was Pope John Paul's message this week.