

Out of the spotlight, Israel and Vatican negotiate holy sites

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Vatican flags raised outside Jerusalem's Old City before Pope Benedict's visit, 6 May 2009/Baz Rattner

There have been a series of significant and highly publicised events recently in Vatican-Jewish relations.

Pope Benedict put his predecessor Pius XII [along the road to Roman Catholic sainthood](#) last month, angering many Jews who accused the wartime pope of turning a blind eye to the Nazi Holocaust. Benedict defended the move this week during his [first visit](#) to Rome's synagogue, which prompted Israel to ask the pope to [open up the Vatican archives](#) covering Pius' reign between 1939-1958.

But behind the scenes, out of the spotlight, the Catholic church and Jewish state have restarted efforts to put to rest a [property dispute in the Holy Land](#) that goes back much further than World War Two or Israel's founding in 1948. Churches acquired large amounts of land around Jerusalem as the Ottoman empire went into decline from the early 19th century. Today, many official Israeli buildings sit on leased church land. But agreement on the legal status of these properties has evaded governments and popes for decades.

After Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu took office early last year, his Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon was made pointman in a push to settle the [decades-old debate](#). Ayalon was at the Vatican last month to try to narrow divides over six religious sites, including what is believed by Christians to be the [Cenacle of the Last Supper](#), whose future status remains uncertain. Negotiating teams held a meeting again this month, which ended with the vague statement that they *"did useful work in atmosphere of cordiality"* and that they would meet again. Ayalon heads to the Vatican again in May.

The Vatican got some unexpected support last week from a prominent rabbi who is active in Christian-Jewish dialogue and attended the pope's visit to the Rome synagogue. [Rabbi David Rosen](#), the British-born international director of interreligious affairs of the American Jewish Committee, told the Israeli newspaper *Haaretz* that Israel's behaviour toward the Vatican since they [agreed to diplomatic relations in 1993](#) has been *"outrageous."*



Rabbi David Rosen (left) in delegation greeting Pope Benedict at Rome's main synagogue 17 Jan 2010/Max Rossi

"Any (other) country would have threatened to withdraw its ambassador long ago over Israel's failure to honour agreements," he said. Rosen said the Vatican agreed to diplomatic relations after Israel said it would recognise the legal status of Catholic institutions and exempt their property in Israel from taxes.

This was supposed to take about two years, he said, but this has not still not happened. Rosen told *Haaretz* the Vatican wanted its local hierarchy to be recognised under Israeli law and treated as a whole organisation, rather than treating each Catholic church as a separate nonprofit organisation as is now the case. Israeli bureaucrats wore down the Vatican by negotiating every tax clause separately instead of granting a general concession, as the Vatican expected them to do, Rosen said.

Neither side expects a deal to be reached in the next few months, officials say. But were an agreement to emerge, it would certainly set a precedent in Israel's future land transactions with religious institutions and perhaps play a part in further improving Vatican-Jewish relations.

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