

# Catholic community welcomes PM's meeting with Pope John Paul II

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KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. — There is an air of excitement among the 700,000-strong Catholic community in Malaysia over Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's upcoming visit to the Vatican on the invitation of Pope John Paul II.

Father Lawrence Andrew, editor of the country's sole weekly church publication for Catholics, *The Herald*, said the meeting between Dr Mahathir and the Pope would be a meeting of like-minded leaders.

"Just like the Pope, an illustrious thinker and a leading moral authority who has been rushing to the aid of people all over the world, Dr Mahathir has been accepted as a leader who has offered the world a formula for peace and stability.

"The Vatican has recognised Dr Mahathir's unique position as a world leader, sought after by Islamic countries and developing nations."

Father Andrew said it could be said that Malaysia was invited by the Vatican to be in partnership with the world in efforts to overcome terrorism.

He said the Catholic community of Malaysia would ask Dr Mahathir to thank the Pope on their behalf for his leadership and tireless effort in reaching out to many people.

"Dr Mahathir should also request that the Pope initiate a trilateral dialogue between Muslims, Jews and Christians, to solve the tension between Israel and Palestine," he said.

Father Simon Yong, assistant parish priest at St Francis Xavier Church in Petaling Jaya, said the invitation came as a surprise to him and he was happy that the Prime Minister had accepted the invitation.

"We would like Dr Mahathir to inform the Pope how the Government allows freedom of practice for Christians and people of other faiths in the country, in view of its multi-racial and multi-religious policy.

"I wish the Malaysian Government would also invite the Pope to visit Malaysia and give our Catholics a chance to meet him."

Vice-chairman of the International Council of World Evangelical Alliance, Reverend Wong Kim Kong, who is also a member of the Malaysian Consultative Council Of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and Sikhism (MCCBCHS), said the meeting between Dr Mahathir and the Pope would help foster closer understanding between the Christian and Islamic worlds.

"Dialogue between the two leaders will help clarify the long misunderstanding between the two

faiths while at the same time promote the liberal and pragmatic approach of Malaysia."

Leaders of other faiths in the MCCBCHS were pleased to hear of Dr Mahathir's meeting with the Pope.

Malaysia Hindu Sangam president A. Vaithilingam said it was appropriate for Dr Mahathir, being the leader of a multi-racial and multi-religious country, to meet the Pope.

"In fact many Arab leaders such as Palestinian President, Yasser Arafat have also met the Pope. Such meetings will promote good inter-faith relations."

The president of the Sasanah Abhiwurbhi Wardhana Society, the oldest registered Buddhist organisation, Sarath Surendre, said the invitation was an honour for Dr Mahathir, Malaysia and Third World countries.

"I think the meeting reflects the two leaders' efforts to promote inter-religious harmony," said Sarath.

MCCBCHS vice-president Harcharan Singh said: "The Pope is a special person and any leader who holds the common good of people in high regard, should meet him."

Roman Catholic Archbishop of Kuala Lumpur, Bishop Anthony Soter Fernandez, who is MCCBCHS president, is on leave in Europe and is expected to be at the Vatican when Dr Mahathir arrives there on June 7.

In **Kuching**, Sarawak Catholic Church head Bishop Datuk Peter Chung described the upcoming meeting between Dr Mahathir and Pope John Paul II as most welcome.

He said the visit would not only be good for the country but also for the Catholic Church.