

# The Holy See, world's smallest nation

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's meeting with Pope John Paul II in the Vatican City has sparked an uncommon interest among Malaysians in the world's smallest independent state.

To most Malaysians outside the Roman Catholic faith, the Vatican may mean two things — it is the home and office of the Pope, the head of the Catholic church, and Michelangelo's paintings in the Sistine Chapel.

Perhaps many are still confused over the term "The Holy See" and what it has to do with the Vatican City.

The Holy See is the official name of the state, of which the Pope is the Head of State. The Vatican City is its capital.

It is an enclave in Rome, Italy's capital, with a land boundary of 3.2km around the tiny state's mere 0.44 sq km total land area.

The Holy See is a Permanent Observer at the United Nations. According to its Apostolic Nuncio Archbishop Renato R. Martino, who represents the state at the UN, observer status and not full membership is preferred because the Holy See wants to maintain "absolute neutrality in specific political problems".

The Holy See became independent of Italy on Feb 11, 1929. Italy in the mid-1800s had seized Papal states in the Italian peninsula, giving rise to disputes between each succeeding pope and the government.

This was resolved in 1929 by the Lateran Treaty, which established the Vatican City as an independent state and granted Roman Catholicism special status in Italy.

The Holy See has a population of about 890 people, comprising mainly Italians and Swiss. Most of the dignitaries, priests, nuns, guards and 3,000 lay workers there live outside the city.

Because of its unique position as a religious state, it has no legal system, judiciary, or military.