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Israeli leader calls pope 'great shepherd of common heritage'

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NCR Today

Vatican City — Pope Francis met Monday morning with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in their first meeting and as a possible precursor for a visit by the pope to the Holy Land some time next year.

The meeting, which lasted about 25 minutes in the Vatican's Apostolic Palace, saw the two exchange gifts. Netanyahu presented the pope with a book written by his father on the Spanish inquisition, inscribing the text with a dedication: "To His Holiness Pope Franciscus, a great shepherd of our common heritage.?"

The short encounter comes following Francis' meetings with Israeli President Shimon Peres in April and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in October. After the October visit, Abbas said he had personally invited the pope to the Holy Land.

News reports last week citing Israeli sources indicated the pope might visit the area next May, but the Vatican is yet to confirm a trip.

During their meeting Monday, Netanyahu also gave the pope a silver menorah, a nine-branched candleholder used in the annual Jewish celebration of Hannukah, which is continuing through Thursday. Francis presented the Israeli leader with a large plaque featuring an image of Saint Paul the Apostle, who was a devout Jew who became a follower of Jesus Christ.

Although members of the Vatican's press pool for the event Monday said they could not hear whether Netanyahu and the pontiff discussed a possible visit by the pope to Israel, one member of the pool said she could overhear Netanyahu's wife Sara mention she and her husband were "looking forward" to some

event, but could not hear which event specifically.

Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the director of the Holy See Press Office, told the pool following the meeting that the Vatican would not announce a visit to the Holy Land before sending an advance team to scout possible visit sites.

Netanyahu presented Francis with a Spanish version of his father's book, originally published in English in 1995 under the title *The Origins of the Inquisition in Fifteenth-Century Spain*. According to the publisher's notes on the text, the book refutes previous historical accounts that the Inquisition targeted Jews, arguing instead that it targeted Christians for political ends.

The Israeli leader was also set to meet Monday with members of the Italian government. Netanyahu's visit with Francis is his third with a pope. He met previously with Pope Benedict XVI in 2009 and Pope John Paul II in 1997.

Any visit by the pope to Israel next year would coincide with the 50th anniversary of Pope Paul VI's visit to Jerusalem in 1964, which took place before the Vatican recognized the Israeli state.

Francis previously visited Israel in 1973. A report by *The Times of Israel* last April revealed that then-Fr. Jorge Mario Bergoglio arrived in the country just as the Yom Kippur War started and spent six days inside his hotel, studying the Saint Paul's letters to the Corinthians.

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The pope was also to meet Monday with Catholic bishops from the Netherlands, who are in Rome for their *ad limina* visit. That meeting, originally scheduled for Thursday, was pushed forward because the pope is also meeting this week with the eight cardinals he has tasked with advising him on reform of the Vatican's central bureaucracy.

The pope was not to hold individual meetings with the Dutch prelates, instead meeting them in a group.

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