

POPE MEETS WITH THE TERRORIST WHO TRIED TO KILL HIM

Post Foreign Desk

ROME — Pope John Paul II sat down with Mehmet Ali Agca in his prison cell yesterday and personally pardoned the Turkish terrorist who tried to kill him.

The Pope called his visit to Rebibbia prison outside Rome a "historic day in my life as a man, a Christian, as a bishop and bishop of Rome . . . especially the meeting" with his would-be assassin.

Agca is serving a life sentence for shooting the Pope on May 13, 1981, in St. Peter's Square.

Providence had intervened, the Pope said, in an "extraordinary and also wonderful way in that today, after two years, I'm able to meet my assailant and repeat the pardon that I expressed immediately to

to declare publicly, when I was able, from the hospital."

Five days after the shooting, while still in his hospital bed, the Pope announced he had pardoned Agca.

The 25-year-old Turk told reporters in a surprise encounter earlier this year that he was sorry for the attack.

"I repent shooting the Pope. I am against terrorism," he said, adding, "I admire the Pope."

Vatican officials and several guards outside the open cell door watched as the Pope spoke quietly with Agca in his stark prison cell. Agca knelt and kissed the pontiff's ring at the end of the encounter.

John Paul and Agca were alone in the cell for 21 minutes, huddled together as they talked in

Vatican officials described the meeting as "almost like a confession." Agca is a Moslem.

The officials said John Paul appeared deeply moved and quoted him as telling one reporter who approached him:

"I spoke as to a brother whom I have pardoned and who has my complete trust."

Asked what they talked about, the Pope said, "That is a secret that must remain between me and him."

Officials of the Italian government and the prison applauded the Pope when he arrived at the prison. Then he went to the chapel, where 500 prisoners in civilian clothes were waiting.

More than 100 unarmed guards lined the inside wall of the chapel. The Pope greeted the prisoners individually,

and some kissed him on the cheek and hand.

In a welcoming speech, Luca Onesti, a right-wing terrorist, thanked the Pope for coming "because it makes us feel that we are not abandoned, not alone against the world, that there is someone who thinks of us and who loves us."

The Pope read from the Bible during a prayer service and delivered a 30-minute speech. He said he had come "within these walls in which you cannot help but feel cut off and cold to bring you the warmth of a friendly word together with the comfort of hope."

Police took extraordinary security precautions, posting guards outside the prison walls and erecting blocks on the roads leading to the prison.