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SUBJECT: VATICAN: ENCOURAGEMENT, BUT NO CHANGE ON TURKEY/EU POLICY

REF: A) ANKARA 6529; B) 04 VATICAN 1164; C) 04 VATICAN 3196

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CLASSIFIED BY: Peter Martin, Pol/Econ Chief, Vatican, State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

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Summary

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¶1. (C) Despite media reports to the contrary, the Vatican remains officially neutral on the subject of Turkey's EU bid. It maintains its position that it sees "no obstacle" to Turkey's entry if the GoT fulfills the Copenhagen criteria on religious freedom. Holy See officials were quick to speak out and clarify the Holy See's stance following media reports on Turkish PM Erdogan's claim of new support from Pope Benedict. Referring to the Copenhagen criteria, Cardinal Secretary of State Bertone did make a statement of "hope" that Turkey would be able to fulfill the conditions put before it regarding its EU bid. While this should not be interpreted as an endorsement of Turkey's entering the Union, it was certainly encouragement for the GoT to enact needed reforms and continue to work towards integration. Top officials including Deputy Foreign Minister equivalent Pietro Parolin have spoken frankly in private, confirming that the pope's statements in Turkey did not represent a shift in the Holy See's stance. Vatican officials here are waiting for the return of the delegation Friday to hear the back story from Turkey. End Summary.

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Position Unchanged

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¶2. (C) Media have run with Turkish PM Erdogan's claim that Pope Benedict told him he now supported Turkey's bid to join the EU. In fact, according to various high-level Vatican officials, the Holy See's position has not changed; the Vatican remains officially neutral on the subject, and maintains that it sees

"no obstacle" to Turkey's entry if the GoT fulfills the criteria established by the December 2002 Copenhagen Summit (ref b).

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Officials Speak Out

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¶3. (SBU) Holy See officials were quick to speak out following reports on Erdogan's statement. Press office director Federico Lombardi issued a statement emphasizing that the Holy See had neither the power nor the competency to intervene on the precise point of Turkey's entry in the European Union. Lombardi did note that the pope had expressed his appreciation for the Alliance of Civilizations initiative promoted by PM Erdogan, and noted the Vatican's encouragement of dialogue on this and related issues. New Holy See FM equivalent Archbishop Dominique Mamberti chimed in that the Holy See had not expressed an official position on the issue of Turkey's entry. He also referred to the need for Turkey to live up to the Copenhagen criteria, a sentiment echoed by his boss, Holy See Secretary of State Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, who said he hoped Turkey "could fulfill the conditions put before it to join the European Union." [Note: Bertone's statement should not be interpreted as an endorsement of Turkey's entering the Union, but was certainly encouragement for Turkey to enact needed reforms. It was significant as a rare public voicing of the Vatican's long-held position on the issue.]

¶4. (C) Privately, top Vatican officials including Deputy FM Pietro Parolin have confirmed that the pope's statements in Turkey did not represent a shift in the Holy See stance on Turkey's EU bid. "We all hope that Turkey will take the steps on religious freedom and human rights that are necessary to enter," a foreign ministry official told us. The media will "always say what they want," but the Vatican position has not

changed, he said. Confidentially, he was skeptical about Turkey's commitment to religious freedom, expressing doubts, for example, about the GoT's new Law on Foundations (ref a). He did not elaborate.

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Comment

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¶5. (C) In the wake of his Regensburg speech and in an effort to clarify or soften his widely-reported 2004 remarks expressing doubts about Turkey's place in the EU (please see ref c), Benedict likely said something relatively positive about European integration that Erdogan (for whatever reason) interpreted more broadly. The pope was certainly trying to put a positive face on his Turkey trip whenever possible, and his shift in tone from 2004 is noteworthy. The Vatican will maintain its neutrality on the EU question, but its encouragement of dialogue and further reforms are useful in the context of USG goals on the issue.

SANDROLINI