

Rome summit focuses on Middle East peace

By Agostino Bono
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — Less than a week after the shooting stopped, the Catholic Church began picking up the pieces of the Persian Gulf war and attempting to fashion them into a peace plan.

The overall aim of a March 4-6 Vatican meeting was to give the church a strong, unified voice in solving political problems in the Middle East.

Among the meeting's specific goals were providing immediate material aid for the shattered lives of war victims and bringing about renewed efforts at dialogue with Muslims to overcome the identification of Christianity with the Western countries involved in the war.

Hammering out the Vatican peace plan were Pope John Paul II, Vatican officials and Catholic leaders from countries directly involved in the conflict.

A final communique from the summit expressed support for Palestinian's right to a homeland; independence for Lebanon; security for Israel; and international guarantees that Jerusalem would be considered a holy city open to Christians, Muslims and Jews.

The communique also called for a greater sharing of the region's resources and "a severe regulation of arms trafficking and a substantial and controlled disarmament" in the Middle East.

It rejected any interpretations of the war as a conflict between Christianity and Islam, and favored interreligious dialogue with Muslims and Jews.

Among the summit participants were:

- Seven patriarchs from the Middle East, including the Persian Gulf area, representing the region's tiny Catholic minority of 4 million.
- Eight leaders of bishops' conferences from nations involved in the war effort, including the United States, Great Britain and France.
- Seven high-level Vatican officials in charge of diplomacy, relief efforts; Eastern-rite churches; and interreligious dialogue with Jews and Muslims.

The meeting was called by the pope, who has expressed continuing concern over the gulf crisis and the negative effect it was having on the region's other political problems, on relations between the West and the Arab-Islamic world, and on Christian-Muslim-Jewish relations.

The pope quickly set the tone for the meeting and outlined the goals of church efforts in the "postwar gulf."

The participants came from nations that had fought in the gulf war and now "these same pastors call them to reconciliation to build together a future which permits everyone to live in dignity and peace," the pope said in opening the meeting.

That call includes works of charity and working for "a just and durable peace" through solving pressing political problems, he said.

"If yesterday's problems are not resolved or do not even know the beginnings of a solution, the poor of the Middle East — I especially think of the Palestinians and the Lebanese — will be even more threatened," the pope added.

Among problems he cited were a need for greater guarantees against military invasions of one country by another, and to develop a world order that excludes war as a means of solving disputes between nations.

The pope also asked for greater freedom and respect by Arab governments for the region's Catholic minority.

Throughout the area, Catholics face "1,000 difficulties, the greatest of which is to affirm themselves as a Christian minority in Islamic societies," he said.

Islamic attitudes range from tolerance of Christianity to rejection of it, the pope

said.

"There are countries which do not permit Christian communities to take root, celebrate their faith and live according to the demands of their confession. I think especially of Saudi Arabia," he said.

"There is not a religious war in progress" and the gulf fighting was not a "holy war" because "belief in God calls to understanding and dialogue," he added.

Catholics in Arab countries face the same problems as Muslims, he said.

"We can imagine the impatience of Iraqis, Christians and Muslims, as they await a true peace for today and tomorrow," he said.

The pope said the Catholic Church wants to show with these peoples.

"When war sows divisions, suffering and death, it is of primary importance that the Catholic Church appears in the eyes of the world as a community of charity," he said.

Several Catholic leaders from Arab countries said the war has tarnished Christian-Muslim relations.

Catholics need to clarify "the differences between Western political powers and Christianity," said Latin-rite Patriarch Michel Sabbah of Jerusalem, a Palestinian.

Christian Arabs "risk subjugation to new oppression, if not from governments, certainly from Islamic public opinion," said Chaldean Patriarch Raphael I Bidawid, an Iraqi.

"The gulf crisis generated a hardly suitable situation for dialogue" among

Continued on page 5



AP/Wide World Photos
PRAYER FOR PEACE — A woman prays at the door of an Armenian church in Baghdad March 3, the same day allied and Iraqi generals met to discuss the terms of a permanent cease-fire. The church is closed because of damage caused by allied air raids.

Delegate worried about turmoil in Iraq

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

AMMAN, Jordan — The Vatican's nuncio to Iraq — who remained in that country during the gulf war — told an Italian journalist that he is now very worried about the Arab nation's internal condition.

The nuncio, Archbishop Marion Oles, has maintained contacts with communities in the north and south of the country, to keep abreast of conditions outside the capital.

"He strongly discouraged me from staying in Iraq any longer," said Raffaele Luise, a reporter for the Italian state radio network. Luise, who visited the nuncio in early March, described the visit to Catholic News Service March 9 in Amman where he was staying with the last group of

Western journalists to leave Iraq.

Luise said he spent four days in Baghdad and was allowed access to the nunciature. He said he found the archbishop in good health, but — like the rest of the city's population — suffering from the stress of the allied bombing.

Windows were broken throughout the two-story nunciature, water was rationed and electricity was cut, the reporter said. Archbishop Oles had a driver, but little gasoline was available. Two Iraqi nuns helped run the household.

"Monsignor Oles said he felt very alone during the bombings," Luise said. "He would pace in a circle, unable to work or concentrate."

But the archbishop was far from idle during the war, according to Luise. In one in-

stance he spent two days helping a Filipino woman find a burial site for her child who was killed in the bombings.

The nuncio said he was convinced that the plight of the refugees and third-country nationals, such as the Filipino mother, was one of the untold stories of the war, Luise said.

On March 7, the day Luise and other foreign journalists were forced to leave Iraq, Archbishop Oles was trying to form a church-administered relief organization to be run by lay people from Iraq's Latin- and Eastern-rite Catholic communities.

During the conflict Archbishop Oles maintained contact with the Vatican — often through the Soviet Embassy in Baghdad, where he was a familiar figure.

The nuncio expressed great joy over the Vatican-sponsored conference of bishops on the Middle East, said Luise, who added that Archbishop Oles considered the meeting a fundamental step. But the Vatican diplomat also expressed doubts about chances for a reconciliation in the region anytime soon, the Italian journalist reported.

Luise said he visited St. Raphael's Hospital, a Catholic-run facility in Baghdad, and found it full of war-wounded. He said the 20 or so sisters who run the hospital told him they had received no shipments of medicine since Sept. 3. The lack of anesthetics was especially critical, he said, and the nuns had appealed for Western assistance.

When one Westerner brought in a two-pound box of medicines, the nuns "greeted it as if it were a ton," he said.

There was little or no electricity available to the hospital, he added.

Among the wounded were babies with broken limbs and other injuries, and a number of women suffering from psychological breakdown, Luise said.

He said the nuns told him the wounded had been transferred from a government hospital. They said they had treated some 1,500-2,000 seriously injured people.

Bishop's headquarters picketed by women's-ordination backers

WASHINGTON (CNS) — About 50 members and supporters of the Women's Ordination Conference held a Lenten prayer vigil March 8 at the headquarters of the U.S. bishops' conference.

The protest was intended to urge women's ordination and to protest that the bishops as a body had not called the Persian Gulf war immoral.

Participants, gathered in front of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and U.S. Catholic Conference, also voiced concern over such issues as domestic violence against women, racism, human-rights violations and homosexual rights.

The March 8 date was chosen to coincide with the U.N.-declared International Women's Day.

The group said that each day four women are killed by husbands or boyfriends, and that every six minutes a woman is raped in the United States.

Loretto Sister Maureen Fiedler of the Quixote Center in suburban Washington told the group that the U.S. bishops failed

to strongly oppose the Persian Gulf war.

"Too many of these bishops said 'yes' to this war, or worse yet, equivocated with vague references to a just war theory or non-committal prayers for peace," Sister Fiedler said. "Their responses suggest that it may be time to throw the just war theory into the theological garbage pile of history."

William Ryan, a spokesman for the U.S. Catholic Conference, said the NCCB-USCC issued 17 statements before and during the war.

"I think that shows that the bishops have expressed concern about the moral and human consequences of the war," Ryan said.

Among those expressing such concern were Rochester's Catholic Bishop Matthew H. Clark and Episcopal Bishop William G. Burrill, who, with the clergy of their respective dioceses, issued a Dec. 7, 1990 statement asserting that an offensive war against Iraq could not be considered a just war.