

Catholics amplify anti-war efforts

VATICAN CITY (CNS) — As the United States counted down to a possible attack on Iraq this winter, Pope John Paul II and his top aides turned up the volume on a litany of cautions and caveats.

The pope used his globally broadcast Christmas blessing to proclaim that a new war in the Middle East is entirely avoidable and that this is not the way to fight terrorism.

Throughout December, a string of high-level Vatican experts had voiced increasingly sharp criticism of the U.S. threat to unilaterally depose Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, saying such a war would be unjustified, counterproductive, devastating to civilians and in violation of U.N. rules.

Catholic war protesters in the Diocese of Rochester also called on the nation to avert war — and criticized the U.S. bishops for not explicitly condemning a possible war and for adhering to the just-war theory.

Seventeen protesters representing Pax Christi Rochester and St. Joseph's House of Hospitality in Rochester, a Catholic Worker facility, demonstrated Dec. 27 around the flagpole in front of the Pastoral Center in Gates. The protesters chose the date because it was the Feast of the Holy Innocents, commemorating Herod's slaughter of Jewish male children as his troops searched for the infant Jesus. Many of the same protesters had demonstrated at the same spot one year earlier to protest the U.S. bishops' support for the war in Afghanistan.

The protesters delivered a statement addressed to Bishop Matthew H. Clark that condemned the U.S. bishops' acceptance of the just-war theory, and their reference to it during their most recent statement on Iraq. At their national meeting in November, the bishops voted overwhelmingly to urge the United States to "step back from the brink of war" with Iraq, saying the current circumstances did not justify the use of military force.

"The bishops said they 'find it difficult to justify the resort to war against Iraq,' the protesters wrote. 'Difficult, but not impossible. The bishops have never declared any U.S. war unjust. That would mean the killing would be unjust, and that means murder. That would not accommodate the government, which seems to always be the overriding

concern."

Jan Bezila, coordinator of Pax Christi Rochester, said she had received a phone call from one diocesan official regarding the letter to Bishop Clark, but no direct response from the bishop himself. However, Michael Tedesco, diocesan spokesman, said the bishop has already expressed himself on the possible war. He noted, for example, that a priest's council statement issued last year condemning a preemptive strike against Iraq — before all other options were exhausted — was endorsed by the bishop.

"He certainly feels that diplomacy is the way out of this, and that war should be avoided at all costs," Tedesco said of Bishop Clark.

Mark Scibilia-Carver, a Pax Christi supporter from Trumansburg, said that he and his fellow anti-war Catholics want more from Bishop Clark and his fellow bishops — a total condemnation of any possible war. Just-war theory is of pagan origin and has nothing to do with the nonviolence of Jesus, he said, and it has led Christians to slaughter millions in wars over the centuries.

"Just-war (theory) is something the government can easily get around and always has," Scibilia-Carver said.

Meanwhile, an 11-member delegation of priests, nuns and lay Catholics returned from a visit to Iraq with an appeal for Americans to "look into the eyes of the people of Iraq" and see "people who share our hopes and dreams for a peaceful world."

A delegation statement said that the U.S. government was preparing to sacrifice ordinary Iraqis as "collateral damage" in "an unconscionable war."

They asked their fellow Americans to "join us in insisting that our government stop this madness and commit to a path of active nonviolent resolution."

The delegation, which left from New York Dec. 8 and returned Dec. 21, presented its statement at a prayer service attended by several dozen supporters Dec. 22 in New York at the Church Center for the United Nations.

In a litany delegation members asked forgiveness "for the arrogance of our government as it marches to war" and "for disrupting the process of the United Nations and ignoring the wisdom of



Karin von Voigtlander/Catholic Courier

Jan Bezila, coordinator of Pax Christi Rochester, holds a pair of children's shoes during a protest against the looming war in Iraq. The Dec. 27 demonstration took place at the Diocese of Rochester Pastoral Center in Gates.

the global community."

"Together, we can support the work of the United Nations and other international efforts to build peace," they said in their message. "Together, we can work to create a world free from weapons of mass destruction, a world free from sanctions, violence and war."

At the service and in individual interviews they said they hoped to help ordinary Americans realize the suffering and death that a war against Iraq would mean for innocent people there, and then to see these Americans opposing moves toward war.

But David Robinson, director of Pax Christi USA, said their hopes to speak from their hearts "to the heart of the American people" had been frustrated by a lack of media response.

He noted that the announcement of a press conference to follow the prayer service did not draw any reporters except one from the Catholic News Service.

In Baghdad, television crews from major networks such as CNN and Fox submitted stories about a service with Iraqi Christians at St. Joseph's Chaldean Church in Baghdad Dec. 18 and the reading of the delegation's statement there, but none of the stories was broadcast, Robinson said.

Mercy Sister Kathy Thornton, coordinator of the social justice lobby, Network, said it would send material about the trip to members of Congress, ask Network's 11,000 members to write their representatives in Congress and seek to arrange a "high profile" delegation of top church leaders and members of Congress to visit Iraq.

In Iraq, the delegation she was with visited schools and hospitals,

traveled to Basra in southern Iraq, met with bishops and other representatives of the Christian community and talked with various other Iraqis, including a high official of the Iraqi government.

Robinson said the official acknowledged that Iraq developed programs of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons during its 1980s war with Iran, but told the delegation the materials had since been destroyed.

Even if some have been retained, the threatened U.S. military action is "far out of proportion to the threat," Robinson said.

Delegation members said the United States was acting inconsistently because it did not make the same response to other countries, such as Israel and Iran, that also had nuclear weapons.

They also complained that the United States applied a double standard when it insisted on Iraqi compliance with U.N. Security Council resolutions but did not make the same demand of Israel.

Richard McDowell, a Massachusetts resident who said he was formerly in social work and now did occasional carpentry to support himself, helped organize the trip, his 15th delegation to accompany to Iraq. He said that he had seen some surface improvement over the years in the condition of some Iraqi individuals, but that 40 percent of the population still depended on food distributed by the United Nations. A war that ended this distribution could mean the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis through famine and disease, he said.

Contains reporting by Rob Cullivan in Rochester.