

Pope offers prayers for Columbia victims

John Thavis/CNS

VATICAN CITY — Pope John Paul II expressed his sadness at the explosion of the space shuttle Columbia and asked for prayers for the seven astronauts who died in the accident.

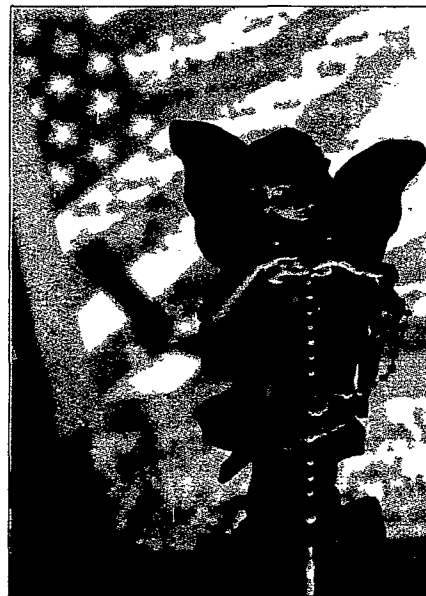
The pope was informed of the tragedy shortly after news agencies reported Feb. 1 that the space shuttle had broken up on re-entering Earth's atmosphere over Texas. Aides said he received the news with "extreme sadness" and prayed for all those touched by the disaster.

Speaking to several thousand people at a noon blessing the following day, the pope expressed his spiritual closeness to the families and friends of those killed.

"The sad news of the tragic explosion of the U.S. space shuttle Columbia has stirred deep emotions in everyone. I ask everyone to pray for the victims, who died while fulfilling an international scientific mission," he said.

"At this time of difficult trial, I am spiritually close to the relatives, and I assure them of my prayers," he said.

Experts were investigating why the shuttle burst into flames and disintegrated on its way to a planned landing in Florida. Flying on the space ship with six U.S. crew members was Israel's first astronaut, a former fighter pilot and father of four.



An angel statue graces a memorial to the space shuttle Columbia crew outside NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston Feb. 2.

Also on board was the first Indian-born woman astronaut, who became a naturalized citizen after immigrating to the United States.

In Jerusalem, Father Shawkri Batarian, chancellor of the Latin Patriarchate, said Patriarch Michel Sabbah had made special mention of the seven astronauts in his daily prayer for all victims of accidents and violence.

"We are all very sad for the victims of this tragedy and we pay our respects to the families of the victims," said the chancellor.



A December 2002 file photo shows the crew of the space shuttle Columbia. The seven astronauts perished when the vehicle broke up over the skies of Texas Feb. 1 minutes before it was to land. From left are mission commander Rick Husband, pilot William McCool, payload specialist Ilan Ramon, mission specialist David Brown, payload commander Michael Anderson and mission specialists Laurel Salton Clark and Kalpana Chawla.

SHUTTLE

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payload commander, Air Force Lt. Col. Michael Anderson, 43, received a master's degree in physics from Creighton in 1990.

He called Anderson, who had planned to visit the campus in April, "a man of faith" who "lived in the pursuit of new knowledge. He was a true 21st-century pioneer."

Before Columbia's Jan. 16 launch, Anderson sent an e-mail message to Jesuit Father Thomas McShane, a Creighton physics professor, asking that the priest keep him in his prayers during the mission.

In addition to McCool and Anderson, the others killed in the Columbia disaster were Ilan Ramon, 48, the first Israeli astronaut to go into space; Kalpana Chawla, 41, an Indian-American; David M. Brown, 46; Laurel Blair Salton Clark, 41; and Rick D. Husband, 45.

At Our Lady of the Angels Cathedral in Los Angeles, Mass began Feb. 2 with 70 seconds of silence while the church bells tolled seven times, once for each astronaut lost on the shuttle.

According to a Feb. 1 Archdiocese of Detroit announcement, Cardinal Adam J. Maida called "on the priests and the people of the archdiocese to remember in prayer those whose lives have been impacted by the space shuttle Columbia disaster — the crew members, their families and the support teams. May God hold them all in the palm of his hand."

Bishop Borgess High School in the Detroit suburb of Redford Township had sent an experiment with the space shuttle on how viruses and antibiotics are affected by radiation. It was one of only 10 schools from around the country selected to have

their experiments taken aboard Columbia.

Ron Ferenczi, 52, the Bishop Borgess science teacher whose students designed the experiment, said after the shuttle disaster, "I almost passed out because I couldn't believe it."

The Associated Press reported that a Catholic service Feb. 2 for U.S. troops stationed in Bagram, Afghanistan, included prayers for the shuttle crew. It included the hymn "On Eagles' Wings" at communion, and the hymn "I'll Fly Away" at the conclusion.

Sen. Sam Brownback, R-Kan., said in a Feb. 1 statement that as chairman of the Senate Space, Science and Technology Subcommittee, he was prepared to help with NASA's investigation of the accident.

"As NASA determines what went so terribly wrong, we will be diligent in doing everything we can in the Congress to give NASA all the support it needs to make sure we press forward with scientific advances, and that nothing like this happens again," he said.

"The inspiration these astronauts gave to children, educators, and hopeful citizens around the world will not be forgotten," added Brownback, a Catholic. "They will forever remain in our memories. May God bless them and their families."

Rep. Chris Smith, R-N.J., another Catholic in Congress, said in a Feb. 1 statement, "It is now incumbent upon NASA scientists to do everything that is humanly possible to fully investigate this catastrophe and determine what went wrong. The work of manned space flight must continue."

Contributing to this story was Audrey Sommers in Redford Township, Mich.

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