

Pope asks Blair to avoid Iraq war

John Thavis/CNS

VATICAN CITY — In a private audience with one of the staunchest supporters of possible military action against Iraq, Pope John Paul II told British Prime Minister Tony Blair to make every effort to avoid war and "spare the world new divisions."

The encounter at the Vatican Feb. 22 was the most prominent in a week of meetings, speeches and peace initiatives by church leaders at the Vatican and around the world.

In a strongly worded public appeal a day after the Blair meeting, the pope said a new war in Iraq could "disturb the entire region of the Middle East" and aggravate tensions around the world. He said all believers should reject the violence of terrorism and the logic of war, and he asked Catholics to pray and fast in a special way for peace on Ash Wednesday, March 5.

Blair, who with U.S. President George W. Bush has led the push for a potential military strike against Saddam Hussein's regime, has recently emphasized what he calls the "moral argument" for war. The pope and his aides have argued just as

forcefully that they do not see conditions for a just war in Iraq.

Blair, an Anglican, arrived at the Vatican with his wife, a Catholic, and three of their four children. He met alone with the pope for 30 minutes, then held a longer meeting with the Vatican secretary of state, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, and the Vatican's foreign minister, Archbishop Jean-Louis Tauran.

A Vatican statement after the meeting made it clear that the church leaders had not changed their thinking on the war. It said the pope had expressed to Blair "the wish that every effort be made to spare the world new divisions in resolving the grave situation in Iraq."

It said the pope and his aides had emphasized the need for all sides to cooperate with the U.N. and utilize the "resources offered by international law, in order to forestall the tragedy of a war that is still considered avoidable by many parties."

"Special attention was given to the humanitarian situation of the Iraqi people, who have already suffered greatly during the long years of the embargo," it said.

It was Blair's first meeting with



Vatican/CNS

British Prime Minister Tony Blair meets with Pope John Paul II at the Vatican Feb. 22. The pontiff urged Blair to make every effort to avoid war and "spare the world new divisions."

Pope John Paul. The day before, he said he recognized that the two held different perspectives on the war.

"I obviously know the views of the pope very well, and they are very clear. Let me just make one thing also plain. We do not want war. No one wants war," he told reporters in Rome.

"But there is a moral dimension to this question, too. If we fail to disarm Saddam peacefully, then where does that leave the authority of the United Nations? And if we leave Saddam in charge of Iraq, with his weapons of mass destruction, where does that leave the Iraqi people, who

are the principal victims of Saddam?" he said.

As Blair visited Rome, Catholic and Anglican leaders in Britain said the prime minister had not made a convincing case for war.

In a Feb. 20 statement, Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor of Westminster and Anglican Archbishop Rowan Williams of Canterbury said working through the U.N. and its weapons inspections in Iraq "could and should render the trauma and tragedy of war unnecessary."

More than 1 million antiwar protesters marched in London Feb. 15, a demonstration that was backed by Bishop Patrick O'Donoghue of Lancaster.

"My Christian conscience is troubled by the fact that hundreds of thousands of Iraqis will die as a result of a war. The World Health Organization estimates that there could be 100,000 casualties and another 400,000 affected by internal displacement and disease," Bishop O'Donoghue said.

At the Vatican, the pope and his aides met Feb. 18 with U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan to discuss the Iraqi crisis. Afterward, the Vatican held out hope for "just and effective solutions" that would spare Iraqi civilians further suffering. It said the crisis should be resolved through the United Nations, which it described as the guarantor of international law.

Annan met separately with Cardinal Sodano and Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, a retired French prelate who had just returned from a special Vatican mission to deliver a personal papal message to Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

Cardinal Sodano said war with Iraq was not inevitable and expressed support for a Feb. 17 European Union resolution calling for the peaceful disarmament of Iraq.

Justice recuses himself from case

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

New York State Supreme Court Justice Harold Galloway has recused himself from a lawsuit brought by opponents of planned renovations of Rochester's Sacred Heart Cathedral against the City of Rochester Planning Commission.

Justice Galloway said he was removing himself from the case because he had publicly discussed the planned renovations with someone in the cathedral rectory several months ago, and did not want to give any appearance of partiality by presiding over the case. Galloway said he had attended Mass at the cathedral and later had a discussion about the renovations with a woman in the rectory.

"I think it's appropriate that I recuse myself," he told attorneys for the disputing parties Feb. 20 in his courtroom at the Hall of Justice in Rochester.

Attorneys for both sides thanked the judge for his decision. The Diocese of Rochester is not a respon-

dent to the lawsuit, but is an interested party in the case. An attorney for the diocese was present and will be allowed to participate fully in all the case's proceedings.

Late last year, opponents of plans to renovate Sacred Heart filed suit against the planning commission, claiming it had acted in an "arbitrary, capricious and illegal manner" by rejecting an application to designate the church a landmark. The plaintiffs are asking for annulment of the decision to reject the landmark application.

The landmark application likewise had been brought to the city by renovation opponents. The planning commission voted 5 to 3 in October to deny the application, which previously had received unanimous approval from the city's seven-member preservation board. Landmark designation would have required the diocese to seek city approval for certain exterior and interior changes.

The lawsuit contends that the planning commission ignored or

overlooked proper procedures in several areas before rejecting the application. The plaintiffs suing the commission are members of the Sacred Heart Preservation Committee, a group fiercely opposed to cathedral renovations.

Renovations are slated to be completed by Easter of 2004, according to Michael Tedesco, diocesan spokesman. Tedesco said the diocese would continue with the renovations while the case is pending.

When asked about the length of time that had transpired between the suit's filing and the judge's decision to recuse himself, Alan Knauf, the attorney representing the plaintiffs, said judges generally read documents related to a case only after the last of them had been filed. He added that as far as he knew, the last of the lawsuit's papers had been filed two days before the judge's decision. A new judge should be named soon, Knauf said.

"Hopefully, we'll be in court in a couple of weeks," he said.

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