

Catholic Courier

DIOCESE OF ROCHESTER, NEW YORK

VOL. 114 NO. 21

THURSDAY, MARCH 6, 2003

75¢

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Can 'preventive war' be just?

Catholics debate an attack on Iraq

If the United States attacks Iraq, will the Catholic Church consider it a just war?

That's the question that's being debated among Catholics throughout the world, including young Catholics in Elmira. Students at Holy Family Junior High recently sent rice packets to President George W. Bush, asking him to "send this rice to the people of Iraq; do not attack them." The rice packets were accompanied by a quote from Romans 12:20: "If your enemies are hungry, feed them."

Holy Family religion teacher Theresa McNamara asked the students to send the rice packets. Her request — which was not a mandatory assignment — was inspired by her participation in Pax Christi, the international Catholic peace movement, which has taken a strong stance against attacking Iraq. Pax Christi Elmira has been promoting the rice campaign, she said, as well as holding weekly vigils against a war.

"It's not a political issue; it's more of a religious issue," McNamara said when asked about the appropriateness of asking the children to weigh in on the war debate. She pointed out that her eighth-grade students had recently studied the church's just-war theory, and that she thought asking them to participate in the rice campaign gave them something concrete to do in relation to their study.

"They should feel that they have a voice in their government," she said.

McNamara said no parents have criticized her for asking



Reuters/CNS

A U.S. soldier lies low in the Kuwaiti desert near the border with Iraq Feb. 19. Catholics around the world are debating whether launching a preventive war against Iraq would be just.

the students to participate in the rice mailings. One of those parents is Scott Pautz, whose daughter, Molly, is an eighth-grade student of McNamara's. Pautz is also a lieutenant colonel in the Army Reserves and has served in Bosnia.

The 22-year Army veteran said he had no problem with McNamara asking the students to send the rice packets

in opposition to a war he has trained to fight. He did say, however, that he thought the rice could have been sent to another country whose children are suffering rather than to Bush. Pautz added that he greatly admires McNamara and would rather have teachers like her expose students to what's going on in the world instead of shielding them

from it. Nonetheless, the soldier also said he was ready to serve his country if the president asked him.

"When I think of war, I think of how horrific and tragic it can be," he said. "But for wars, we wouldn't be able to send rice to the president and express ourselves as freely as we do."

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Story by Rob Cullivan

