

Papal envoy meets with president

Stephen Steele/CNS

WASHINGTON — Italian Cardinal Pio Laghi delivered a personal message from Pope John Paul II to President Bush during a March 5 meeting at the White House, saying a war without U.N. approval would be “immoral ... illegal, unjust” and that “peaceful avenues” still exist to end the Iraqi crisis.

Addressing journalists at the National Press Club after the meeting, Cardinal Laghi said he could not discuss details, but he paraphrased the end of the pope's letter to Bush: “I assure you, Mr. President, that I am praying for you and America, and I ask the Lord to inspire you to search for the way of a stable peace, the noblest of human endeavors.”

Also taking part in the White House meeting were National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice and Jim Nicholson, U.S. ambassador to the Vatican, the cardinal said.

Cardinal Laghi met March 6 with Secretary of State Colin Powell before flying to New York for a brief stop on his return trip to Rome.

Speaking to Vatican Radio, he said Powell seemed open to the idea of amending the U.N. resolution that could lead to U.S. military action to force Iraq to disarm. “It seems that at least he is on the same line as Great Britain,” which was considering an amendment to give U.N. weapons inspectors more time.

Cardinal Laghi, a former Vatican ambassador to the United States and a friend of Bush's father, former President George H.W. Bush, said the atmosphere of the 40-minute White House meeting was good.

At a press conference following a Mass at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, the cardinal said he did not know if his “message was received with the same intention that it was given.”

Cardinal Laghi said he insisted on discussing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with Bush, saying the solution to Middle East tension rests with solving the conflict in the Holy Land.

Objecting to statements that war would advance the cause of peace and freedom in Iraq, the cardinal said “Look what happened in Afghanistan. ... Peace and freedom hasn't happened there.”

He also expressed concern about Christian-Muslim relations, saying “We are trying to build bridges between Christianity and Islam, and we don't want to destroy those bridges.”

At the earlier press conference, the cardinal said he told Bush, “Today, on Ash Wednesday, Catholics around the world are following the pope's request to pray and fast for peace. ...



Courtesy of the White House/CNS

Papal envoy Cardinal Pio Laghi and President George W. Bush shake hands at the White House in Washington March 5. Cardinal Laghi met with the president at the request of Pope John Paul II and conveyed a personal message from the pope in opposition to possible U.S. war with Iraq.

“The Holy Father himself continues to pray and hope that all leaders who face difficult decisions will be inspired in their search for peace,” the cardinal told reporters.

Cardinal Laghi said a decision on the use of military force “can only be taken within the framework of the United Nations,” and must take into account “the grave consequences” of armed conflict, including the suffering of the Iraqi people and troops on both sides, increased instability in the Middle East and a new gulf between Islam and Christianity.

Speaking about Saddam Hussein, the cardinal told reporters, “If he intends to disarm, certainly at this stage he goes too slowly. He has been promising for 12 years, but now where do we go?”

Maintaining that there is no moral justification for a war against Iraq, the pope and Vatican officials argue that a war on Iraq would be disproportionate to the threat, potentially catastrophic in its effects on civilians and counterproductive to the global fight against terrorism.

However, the Bush administration says it has a legal and moral obliga-

tion to prevent Saddam from using weapons of mass destruction or selling weapons to terrorists for use against the United States.

At the press conference, one jour-

nalist asked Cardinal Laghi what would happen if Bush did not listen to the pope's instructions and the United States went to war with Iraq.

“The Holy Father doesn't give instructions; it is the Gospel that gives instructions to us, and the Gospel is about peace,” he said.

Cardinal Laghi said he didn't speak to reporters at the White House because “they told us not to do it.”

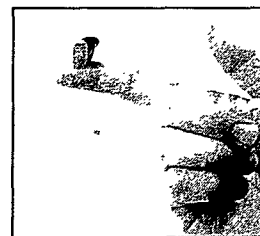
Regulars in the press room said it was unprecedented that someone who met with the president and requested to go to the media stakeout area would not be allowed to do so. One longtime White House correspondent said, “It was an insult.”

Cardinal Laghi later said he was not given a reason but that White House staff told him only that a press conference at the White House would not be allowed, he said.

After the meeting, Nicholson declined to give White House reporters details, but responded to a question about relations between the United States and the Vatican.

“The relationship is very strong because we have such a foundation of common values ... of the freedom and dignity of men,” he said.

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