

# God Squad voices support for war

Duo says freeing Iraqis justifies military action

Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier

Whatever reasons — economic, political or other — compelled the United States to attack Iraq, the liberation of the Iraqi people justifies the war, according to Msgr. Thomas Hartman and Rabbi Marc Gellman, better known as “The God Squad.”

Speaking on behalf of the famed interfaith duo, known for their appearances on ABC’s “Good Morning America” and their own syndicated cable television show, the rabbi said he and the priest “endorse” the war. He made his remarks during the duo’s appearance at Temple Beth El in Brighton the evening of March 27.

“The need of the Iraqi people to be free from tyranny and oppression is a reason (for) this war,” Rabbi Gellman said near the end of the duo’s talk before nearly 1,100 people.

On that note, Msgr. Hartman remarked that “both Marc and I believe (the war) is a confrontation between good and evil.”

Rabbi Gellman is senior rabbi of Temple Beth Torah in Melville, N.Y., and former president of the New York Board of Rabbis. Msgr. Hartman is director of radio and television at Telecare, the TV center for the Diocese of Rockville Centre on Long Island.

The pair’s endorsement of the war was one of the more serious moments in their generally lighthearted and far-ranging discussion of interfaith issues. The rabbi and priest said they had met 15 years ago when they both were invited to appear on a television show to discuss the rela-



Rebecca Gosselin/Catholic Courier

Rabbi Marc Gellman (left) introduces Msgr. Thomas Hartman during their March 27 talk at Temple Beth El in Rochester. The interfaith duo are better known as “The God Squad.”

tionship between Easter and Passover. From that meeting, the two grew to be best friends and popular commentators on interfaith relations, they said.

“We had no clue that world events would conspire in a way as to make (religious tolerance) the most important message that the world could hear now,” Rabbi Gellman said.

Msgr. Hartman, who often played straight man to the comedic rabbi, said he was deeply impressed by his first visit to Rabbi Gellman’s temple. The priest said he was struck by similarities between the synagogue and a Catholic church, from lighted candles indicating the eternal presence of God to the placement of the Torah inside the Holy Ark, which reminded him of the eucharistic tabernacle.

Rabbi Gellman interjected to point out one major difference. “We have fewer crosses,” he quipped.

Both men stressed the need for ongoing dialogue among Christians, Jews and Muslims, especially in light of current tensions in the world.

“It is time that we learn about each other,” Msgr. Hartman said. “It is time that we become friends with

each other.”

On that note, both men said that it was their friendship, not their intellectual rapport, that enabled them to share their theological ideas. They urged audience members to get to know people of different faiths and, at one point, asked audience members to stand for a round of applause if they had best friends of a different faith.

“If your best friend is not the same religion as you, you are a God Squad,” the rabbi remarked.

Rabbi Gellman praised Popes John XXIII and John Paul II for improving relations between Catholics and Jews, and said the church’s example showed there was hope that the Muslim world might improve its currently strained relations with people of other faiths, including Hindus. He noted that the church repudiated anti-Semitism, and that there is now a movement among some Muslims to repudiate suicide bomb-

ings as antithetical to true Islam.

Referring to the sex-abuse scandal that has plagued the U.S. church for more than a year, the rabbi said Catholicism is far more than scandals, noting that the church has produced people such as Mother Teresa, who worked with lepers and whose religious order works among the impoverished of Harlem.

“If you want to attack (the church) as a Jew, you’ll have to come through me,” the rabbi said, drawing applause.

Msgr. Hartman spoke movingly of his brother’s death from AIDS, and urged the audience to practice compassion toward others.

“I pray if you get just one thing out of my talk, feed the hungry, visit the sick and take care of people who are afraid,” the priest said.

The God Squad’s appearance was sponsored by Jewish Family Service, the Jewish Community Center and Catholic Family Center of Rochester, and underwritten by WOKR-TV Channel 13. The pair were introduced by Lawrence W. Fine, executive director of the Jewish Community Federation, and Bishop Matthew H. Clark.

During the introduction, Fine praised the local Jewish and Catholic communities for working hard to implement the 1996 Rochester Agreement between the Diocese of Rochester, the Rochester Board of Rabbis and the Jewish Community Federation. Believed to have been the first of its kind in the country, the agreement called for cooperation between the diocese and the Jewish groups on such matters as combating prejudice and promoting education about each faith.

“This agreement strengthened pre-existing relationships and created new ones,” Fine said. “Our guests this evening are part of that work together.”

## Congress calls for day of prayer

WASHINGTON (CNS) — The House of Representatives called for a national day of prayer, fasting and humility to ask for God’s guidance in meeting the nation’s challenges, to understand its failings and how its people can do better.

In a vote of 346-49 March 27, the House approved a resolution asking the president to issue a proclamation designating a day “for humility, prayer and fasting for all people of the United States.”

The Senate passed a similar resolution March 17 to designate that

day as a day for prayer, fasting and humility.

During brief debate about the measure on the House floor a day earlier, several members cautioned that the effort by the legislative body might send the wrong message.

“This resolution may be seen by some as an attempt to inject religion into this war at a time when some of America’s enemies abroad are asserting that this is indeed a war about religion,” said Rep. Dennis Kucinich, D-Ohio, who voted against the bill.

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