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## Interview: Fr. Nicola Bux

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# Key to solving Mideast problems is strong Christian-Muslim relations

Father Nicola Bux is the head of the Ecumenical Institute of Bari, Italy, the department of the Angelicum University that promotes ecumenical relationships with the Eastern and Orthodox Churches. Father Bux is also vice president of the Europe Near East Center (ENEC), the association that organized the Mideast tour of European Parliament member Roberto Formigoni at the beginning of December, to discuss the liberation of the Italian hostages. Father Bux has traveled extensively in the East, including Russia and in most of the Middle East countries. In 1985 he joined the Ecumenical Institute for Theological Research, which was created in 1964 by Pope Paul VI in Jerusalem following his visit there. He is very close to many religious leaders in that area, in particular to the Patriarch of Baghdad, Bidawid (see box).

Father Bux discussed the war situation with Umberto Pascali on Jan. 16 and 17, before and after the beginning of the hostilities.

“There is still time for a peace initiative. Both the Pope and the Patriarch Bidawid are working in this direction,” Father Bux says. He knows the situation in Iraq quite well. He had been there for two weeks until Dec. 8. More recently, from Dec. 26 to Jan 5 he was in Jerusalem. Shortly after the first bombing on Iraq, Bux urged caution before finally assessing the situation. “It is too soon, we are just at the beginning, we cannot draw any conclusion. It depends on what happens in the next hours and days. We do not know which kind of reaction there could be, knowing that the Arabs are very proud and tend to prepare things in an unexpected way.”

**EIR:** Father Bux, you have talked about the idea of a meeting in the Vatican between George Bush and Saddam Hussein, mediated by the Pope.

**Bux:** We made this proposal there, in Baghdad. We talked to the Iraqi leaders there, [Foreign Minister] Tariq Aziz and others. But they knew the proposal already because we had described it in a press release in which we presented our initiative. We noticed that when we touched the issue of the role of the Holy See and the Pope, we always got a positive answer. Saddam Hussein personally said that he has a great

respect for the Pope. Through us he asked the Pope to pray for peace.

**EIR:** Tell us about your proposal.

**Bux:** This is not a formal proposal. You could consider it like a message in a bottle. We advanced the idea of a meeting between the two Presidents, and in Baghdad the thing was taken with the utmost attention. The Pope spoke already several times about a “generous gesture” he asks the Iraqi President to make, and at the same time he speaks about the necessity of a global conference to discuss all the Middle East problems, including the Palestinian one. I am not saying at all that the Pope is following our modest suggestion. But there were already letters sent to the two leaders and it seems, a direct phone call. The personal approach by the Pope to them happened. But I want to stress that even after the beginning of the hostilities, the peace attempts continue.

**EIR:** What do you think about the attitude of the White House?

**Bux:** I think the Iraqi problem could be faced if there is more availability, more elasticity on the side of the American President. I know that the Catholic Church in the U.S. is asking for peace; I am thinking of the words of Cardinal O'Connor. Here it has been said—and I do not know whether this is true—that the speech on TV by George Bush had been prepared previously. If true, this provokes a reflection: Were they really ready for negotiations if the declaration of war was already written? This ultimatum is very strange, this unprecedented deployment of forces is very strange, because Kuwait is not the first country to be invaded, and this is not the first resolution of the United Nations not to be respected. Two months ago we had another one concerning Israel, and it was rejected. Kuwait is not a state known for its democratic internal life. So the only explanation appears to be: interest. As the Patriarch of Jerusalem, Sabbah, said when he came to Italy: They shouldn't come to us saying that this was done for reasons of justice, because they use two weights and two measures. Why don't they say, “We are there because of the oil”?

## Baghdad Patriarch: 'This war is a crime against God'

"This war is a crime against God and against man. I did not expect that Mr. Bush would go so far. The Pope had told me he was ready to go to Baghdad," the Catholic Patriarch of the Chaldean Rite of Baghdad, Bidawid, declared on Jan. 16. The Patriarch, who is responsible for 1 million Catholics in Iraq, had tears in his eyes when talking to the press. He was in Rome where he had arrived on Jan. 14 with an ecumenical delegation including the two other Christian Patriarchs of Iraq, the Archbishop of the Armenian Church, and the Assyrian Metropolitan. He was engaged in talks with the Vatican and the Italian government to explain the documents issued by the meeting of Iraqi Christian Churches in Baghdad at the beginning of December. The religious delegation was scheduled to leave soon for Switzerland, France, England, and the United States.

"I had hoped up to the last minute, but in politics there is no morality. The American decision prevailed. And even those states that tried up to the end to play an intermediary role had to give up. There will be hundreds of dead among the civilian population, among my faithful."

The day after, he explained how peace had been close and how it had failed. "Immediately after the synod [of Baghdad] I spoke to the Pope inviting him to come to Baghdad. This is the only thing that I kept confidential until now. And the Pope told me that he was ready to

come if diplomatic steps were taken toward the Vatican—in other words, if [besides the Churches] there was an invitation also on the side of the government.

"We did everything to explain to the world the value of the real peace. Iraq was the object of a plot. We tried to obtain Kuwait by peaceful means. We did not succeed. So the U.S. and its allies went wild because it is an oil country. Why did they not do the same thing with Moscow, which occupied the Baltic countries? International law cannot be considered with two weights and two measures. The same is true for Lebanon and Palestine."

In response to a reporter's observation that the Vatican has not distinguished the Gulf crisis from the other Middle East crises, Bidawid replied, "The position of the Vatican has been a reasonable position. And it is the same position as Saddam."

According to the Patriarch, Hussein was ready to accept a papal mediation, but he "did not have time." "Saddam appreciated the words of the Holy Father and appreciated that the Pope asked the Nuncio in Baghdad to remain. The Iraqi ambassador at the Vatican left yesterday afternoon from Rome with the Pope's letter for Saddam, heading toward a secret destination." Also the French peace plan was acceptable to the Iraqi President who "waited some hours before giving his answer to see the reaction of the U.S. and the Europe." If there had not been a negative answer, then "it could have been a good basis for negotiations. This was the opinion of the President, always on condition that the whole Middle East question were put on the table. I was told this by [Foreign Minister Tariq] Aziz's deputy, before leaving for Rome."

The Patriarch said that he had sent a personal letter to George Bush asking for a meeting.

**EIR:** What's the attitude toward the Church and the Pope in the Muslim world?

**Bux:** Why am I convinced that the Church has a key part to play for the solution of the conflict? Recently in Jerusalem I talked not only with the leaders of the Christian hierarchy, but also with several Palestinian Muslims, such as Feisal Hussein, and I found that if among the Muslims there is a certain sympathy for Saddam, there is no desire for a war, and also there, as in Baghdad, I saw a certain expectation of a papal initiative.

The Muslims see the Pope as an unchallenged moral authority able to make his voice heard against the injustice of which the Arab world believes itself to be the victim. Because it is evident that there is a certain moral equivalence between the position that Israel took toward the Palestinians of Lebanon, and the position of Iraq against Kuwait. But the United Nations didn't recognize it and used a double

standard. In the eyes of the Arabs this deprives the U.N. of any credibility for a mediation. My impression is that an initiative of the Church would help very much the non-fundamentalist forces in the Islamic world.

**EIR:** But the war is on right now.

**Bux:** We are convinced that the war, besides being morally unacceptable, is politically disastrous. It is not true, as some politicians say, that in this way we can solve problems in the area. The problems will be complicated enormously without considering that the distance between Europe and the Middle East will increase. History teaches us this; in fact, many of the problems the world suffers today derive from the last world war. Also consider that it is the Christian community in Middle East that will be crushed first in case of war. I found there, in the Middle East, that a strong Muslim-Christian relation in that area would be key to solve the problems.