

Pope Confronts Bush On Mideast Crisis

by Claudio Celani

On April 3, Pope John Paul II told his Foreign Minister, Monsignor Jean Luis Tauran, to summon the Ambassador of the United States to the Holy See, James Nicholson, in order to deliver to Nicholson a Papal message for President George W. Bush. In separate steps, the Papal Ambassador of Israel was also summoned, as well as the Ambassador of the Arab League. The Pope's message to Bush was a call on the President to abandon the "ambiguous" U.S. policy toward the Mideast war crisis.

That same day, the Vatican daily *Osservatore Romano* had published an editorial which condemned the Israeli military offensive in the strongest terms: "The land of the Resurrected is being profaned with iron and fire, and it is daily the victim of an aggression that is becoming extermination."

The Vatican also strongly condemned the Israeli Defense Forces' attempt to destroy with tank fire one of Christendom's holiest churches, the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, believed to stand at or near the place of Jesus Christ's birth.

On April 2, according to the daily *La Stampa*, the Pope had "manifested his solidarity to President Yasser Arafat." Quoting "high-level Vatican sources," the paper reported that the Pope's message had been delivered through Msgr. Pietro Sambini, the Apostolic Nuncio of the Vatican in Jerusalem. According to the sources, Monsignor Sambini is in contact "minute by minute" with the Vatican to inform the Pope on the situation.

'Uncertainties and Contradictions' Of U.S. Policy

Well-informed sources say that Monsignor Tauran confronted Ambassador Nicholson at their April 3 session, over the "evident uncertainties and political contradictions" manifested by President Bush toward what is happening to the civilian population in Palestine, and to the religious institutions in that tortured land. The churches, like the hospitals in the West Bank cities, have been hit and damaged, although they should be protected by immunity from attack.

Though it may not have come up in the meeting at the Vatican, the United States' failures in this regard are the more shocking, considering that large numbers of Palestinian residents of West Bank cities are American citizens—10,000 in Ramallah alone—who returned to the West Bank to live, only after the 1994 signing of the Oslo peace accords.

A similar message was delivered from the Pope to the Israeli Ambassador, Yosef Neville Lamdan, while the Arab

League representative, Mohamed Ali Mohamed, was briefed on the Vatican position. The Pope is sickened by the violation of the holy places of Christianity—the Nativity Church has been under tank artillery fire, and other holy places have been hit—but he reacted first of all to what he had called, on April 1, the "painful Calvary" of the citizens of Jerusalem and the Palestinian people.

Of course, the Vatican condemns Palestinian terror, as was repeated once again in an official statement by the Vatican press office on April 3; but it is clear that the Pope places the main responsibility for the escalation of violence upon the "disproportionate response" of the Israeli government.

The Pope, according to the April 3 statement, condemns "the conditions of injustice and humiliation imposed upon the Palestinian people, as well as the mass reprisals and retaliations, which just increase the sense of frustration and hate." At the same time, the Pope calls for "respecting of the UN resolutions by all parties; proportionality in the use of the legitimate means of defense; the duty for the conflicting parties to protect the Holy places, which is very significant for the three monotheistic religions and the patrimony of all humanity."

Response to Sept. 11 Attacks

These interventions made by John Paul II against the indiscriminate onslaught of the Israeli Defense Forces, are consistent with important statements on terrorism which the Pontiff made in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks in the United States. The world noted then, that he supported the right of nations to defend themselves against terror. But he was equally clear—though this was not as widely reported—in insisting that there was *no right* to respond with indiscriminate military force against a population from which terrorists had come.

The Pope, therefore, as he did after Sept. 11, accepts the principle of "legitimate use of force" to punish acts of terror; but he poses a clear constraint: "proportionality." With this, he clearly condemns Prime Minister Sharon's indiscriminate use of violence against the civilian population, women, elderly people, and children, which the Vatican has called an "extermination," a Nazi-like policy. The Pope stresses, as he did in his World Peace Day message, that a policy of reprisals leads to no solution, and that the conflicting parties must make an act of forgiveness.

The new aspect of the Vatican initiative, which is similar to the one undertaken during the 1991 Gulf War, is that the Holy See is now confronting Bush with his responsibilities, with the aim of pushing him out of his contradictory policy. The Mideast conflict is not a local one. What is at stake, is the future destiny of two peoples, and it therefore has a universal significance, as well as regional and world political implications. The key to the solution lies in the hands of the United States government. Will Bush understand the truth of such a message, or will he, like Stalin, ask, "How many divisions does the Pope have?"