

Can the Pope stop World War III?

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

Following the Baker-Aziz talks in Geneva on Jan. 9, the mood among Europeans, who have lived through two world wars on their territory, rapidly shifted from apprehension to outright fear. The question most frequently asked in the corridors of power, as well as on the streets, is, can war still be avoided? And, if so, by whom? Who, or what institution, has the ability to mobilize public opinion effectively to halt the race toward war?

In the face of attempts on the part of Bonn and Paris to make gestures toward peace, while publicly upholding the war policy of U.S. Secretary of State James Baker, the Catholic Church seems to have taken up the challenge, and is launching an eleventh-hour mobilization, both on the diplomatic plane and among the broad masses.

The Church's effort is not new. Back in November, the authoritative journal *Civiltà Cattolica* of the Jesuits, aired a peace proposal, and on Christmas Day, the Pontiff spoke out on the Gulf crisis, warning, in his "Urbi et Orbi" message, that "war is an adventure, without any turning back." And, immediately thereafter, outgoing Vatican Secretary of State Agostino Casaroli proposed a diplomatic initiative, for an "international authority (institution or person or group of persons)" to mediate an honorable settlement between Bush and Saddam Hussein. Finally, John Paul II intervened a second time, sending a personal message to the European Community (EC) foreign ministers meeting in Luxembourg on Jan. 4, throwing his support behind any European move for negotiations, because "an armed conflict would surely be disastrous."

None of these moves produced any tangible result, largely due to overwhelming American pressures brought to bear on the press and on those European politicians who might have been the vehicles for a Vatican initiative. James Baker's crude arm-twisting lined up the EC's political leadership behind Washington's war drive, rendering a mooted EC-Iraqi meeting meaningless.

Now, in the wake of Baker's Geneva performance, the Vatican has redoubled its efforts, not only reissuing diplomatic proposals, but identifying the root causes and ultimate responsibility behind the push for war.

The Catholic weekly *Il Sabato* issued a scathing attack in its Jan. 12 editorial against the U.S. administration, holding it responsible for creating an international emergency, in order to establish a permanent presence in the region, to control oil supplies. The journal writes that "even the U.S. observers interpret" the Baker-Aziz talks as a farce, "more as a necessary

prelude to justify an American act of war than a real moment of dialogue." It attributes the failure of Casaroli's diplomacy to the fact that it "did not coincide completely with the line of U.S. foreign policy." Most important, the editorial points out that it is not the "rights of peoples" which have been violated in the crisis, but rather "what Pope Pius XI defined as the 'international imperialism of money.'"

Among the authoritative Church representatives interviewed by the magazine are Giuseppe De Rosa, author of the Jesuit peace proposal; Cardinal Silvio Oddi, a seasoned Vatican diplomat with extensive experience in the Mideast; Archbishop Cardinal Martini of Milan; and Roberto Formigoni, vice president of the European Parliament, and the Christian Democratic politician who led the Italian mission to Baghdad in December. The message which emanates clearly from them all is that a solution does exist, but the United States and Great Britain want war.

De Rosa points up the hypocrisy of the Anglo-American position: "If it had been a question of upholding—as it is said—norms of international ethics and law, there would not have been such a general mobilization." Other invasions, into Tibet, Afghanistan, Panama, Lebanon, as well as Transjordan and Gaza, did not provoke such a mobilization, "and when the U.N. intervened with formal condemnation and demands for withdrawal, its decisions were not respected." Going further back, De Rosa stresses the importance of the historical background, "from the fall of the Ottoman Empire after World War I up to the tormented process of national independence. It can be seen, for example, that among the geopolitical motivations which led Great Britain to grant independence to Kuwait in 1961, was the desire to prevent Iraq's access to the sea."

Cardinal Oddi polemically asks if the "gentlemen" of the war party know anything about the region. "Did they ever think about the creation of Kuwait? What region did Kuwait belong to when the British administered Mesopotamia? What region was it detached from? And why? To what states' advantage? Has Iraq never presented any claims? Have they been examined? Has there been a desire to negotiate to see if something might be changed?"

As for what should be changed, both De Rosa and Formigoni conclude that an equitable settlement must include conceding to Iraq access to the sea and the leasing of the two islands of Bubiyan and Warba.

Can the Vatican effect such a settlement? The Church has ordered a total mobilization, with cardinals calling for mass action, Pax Christi organizing prayer vigils, and priests urging their parishes to petition for peace. Whether the Pontiff himself will attempt a dramatic gesture is an open question, but one further item in *Il Sabato* implies he may. A curious background piece draws on documents from the Vatican's secret archives to show how Pope Pius XII in late August 1939 attempted desperately to prevent Germany's invasion of Poland.