

The Pope Leads Diplomacy for Peace

by Claudio Celani

As it was in the days of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Vatican diplomacy is again at the center of efforts to keep world peace. Eyewitnesses reported (see *EIR*, March 26, 1999, "The Man You Can Trust") how, during those days of October 1962, Pope John XXIII played an important role in bringing the two adversaries—the American and the Soviet governments—to reach an agreement that saved world peace and allowed both sides to "save face." There is no doubt that John Paul II is working with the image of his predecessor John XXIII in mind, as is evident from the Pope's World Peace Day message on Jan. 1, 2003, in which he compared the 1962 crisis that brought the world to the brink of thermonuclear war, with the current threat deriving from the "world disorder."

In that message, the Pope recalled John XXIII's response to the threat 40 years ago, in the peace policy of his encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (*Peace on Earth*). John Paul II called for a new "constitutional form" of cooperation among nations based on natural right. No room must be allowed, he said, for arbitrary unilateral action, "pre-emptive war"; otherwise the world will plunge into anarchy.

The Pope's collaborators report that he sees the current peace mission as the most important task of the last period of his pontificate. Thus, Vatican diplomacy has been fully mobilized after the last meeting of the United Nations Security Council, as an indispensable component of the Franco-German-Russian-Chinese-African opposition to war.

The Vatican's strategy is to build the seemingly impossible dialogue between the two "enemies," the Bush Administration and the Iraqi government, exploiting the tiny window offered after the latest report from the UN weapons inspectors. The aim is to build an "exit strategy" with concrete proposals which would be seen by both sides as an acceptable compromise, where both George W. Bush and Saddam Hussein could say, "We saved world peace and avoided suffering to our people."

Hostility From Washington

On Feb. 9, the Pope and his collaborators were the first to learn, from visiting German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, about the Franco-German proposal for a "strengthened inspections" plan. The Vatican's "Mr. Mission Impossible," Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, was sent to Baghdad for an hour-and-a-half meeting with Saddam Hussein, and declared that the Iraqi leader "now is willing to avoid the war." The two may have discussed proposals from Rome, as Saddam Hussein

decided to meet Etchegaray only after his Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz met the Pope. In 1962, it was the Vatican which proposed that the United States should remove its missiles from southern Italy in exchange for the Soviets' withdrawal of theirs from Cuba.

Cardinal Etchegaray declared that he came out of his meeting with Saddam Hussein with "concrete results." Immediately, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan flew to Rome and heard, in the presence of the Pope, a detailed report by the Cardinal. The next task was to convince the United States government. Vatican sources confess that they hardly see a channel they can speak to. The Vatican is frustrated by public statements from National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice, who criticized the Pope's peace efforts. Nothing like this had happened before. White House hostility had also been manifested through an initiative by Jim Nicholson, ambassador to the Holy See and former Bush fundraiser, who organized a public conference in Rome for neo-conservative Michael Novak, to defend the pre-emptive war doctrine as "consistent" with Catholic doctrine. Once in Rome, Novak had a meeting with Secretary of State Cardinal Angelo Sodano, Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, and Archbishop Renato Martino, chairman of the *Justitia et Pax* Commission, but he impressed his interlocutors only through his "apparent lack of will to listen," as a Vatican source told the Italian daily *Corriere della Sera*. Ambassador Nicholson and U.S. Ambassador to Italy Mel Sembler, brought State Department policy planner Andrew Erdmann to Rome to address an audience of diplomats, aristocrats, bankers, prelates, and Italian government officials, assembled in the salon of Countess Elvina Pallavicini, the acknowledged head of Rome's "black nobility."

Facing such hostile activity, the Holy See wonders whether Washington has a secret agenda, a geopolitical game in which the Iraq war is only the first step. A commentary by Radio Vaticana director, Father Pasquale Borgomeo SJ, on the same day the Pope was meeting Kofi Annan, said that Washington seems to consider diplomacy a "waste of time," international law "just one big obstacle," and the United Nations "a club of sophists."

The Pope hopes that the course of American policy can still be changed. But the difficulty remains, what are the next moves for Vatican diplomacy? In this context, the traditional channel represented by the Italian government has threatened to collapse. Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi left for London and Washington on Jan. 29, with a mission to move Bush and Blair closer to the European position, but switched sides, signing the "declaration of eight" European countries backing U.S. unilateral action. But after patient reconstruction work, especially through the Christian Democratic component of the government, Berlusconi made a partial course correction. On Feb. 18, after the Pope-Annan meeting, a public ceremony gave the opportunity for a meeting between a Vatican delegation led by Cardinal Sodano and an Italian government delegation.

Andreotti Confronts Rice

If the Italian government rejoins ranks, this will offer one important instrument to the Vatican efforts; as usual in the past, all resources of Italian diplomacy will add a “second leg” to the Vatican ones. An indication of the new course came on Feb. 19, at the foreign policy debate in the Italian Senate, where Berlusconi’s government accepted an amendment presented by Sen. Giulio Andreotti, committing the government to seek a Parliament vote on decisions on the Iraq issue to be taken by the UN Security Council.

Former Prime Minister Andreotti, who is very close to the Vatican, addressed Condoleezza Rice’s interview with the Italian magazine *Panorama* on Feb. 3, in which Rice had compared what she called the Pope’s current “inaction,” with appeasement towards Hitler. Rice’s statements were seen as an endorsement of the well-known slander against Pope Pius XII. In a rare exercise of directness, Andreotti blasted Rice’s statements: “You cannot call a disrupter those who, like the Pope, due to his magisterium, speak out compromisingly for peace. There has been a bestial statement—allow me to use this term—by the U.S. National Security Advisor, who said that the Vatican is behaving as usual: It is acting as it did with Hitler.”

Whatever the course of the events will be in the next two weeks, the Pope and his collaborators are ready to undertake any step, including a direct approach with George W. Bush. On Feb. 22, the Pope received British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who had been publicly criticized just the day before by the leaders of both the Catholic and the Anglican Churches in Britain. The aim of their meeting was to explore possible differences between Blair and Bush, and also to better understand what really is on Bush’s mind, through his staunchest ally. After the meeting, it was leaked that the Pope is considering a letter to Bush to be delivered by Cardinal Etchegaray. Another option, a visit to Baghdad by Kofi Annan, needs U.S. approval. Cardinal Etchegaray has already been sent to Haiti, on a “stand-by” mission, ready to fly to Washington should a meeting with Bush or Colin Powell be organized.

Eventually, the Pope is ready to undertake a new trip. Where? To Central Asia, his collaborators say, indicating that Iraq is not the issue, but rather the “Great Game” for the control of the Eurasian continent. That is where the next front is, and there one must concentrate efforts to prevent a Clash of Civilizations. In the meantime, the Pope has launched another spectacular action: He called for a day of fasting, for March 5, which is also Ash Wednesday, “for the cause of peace, especially in the Middle East.” The Pope addressed his call to all believers in God: “It is a duty for all believers, whatever the religion to which they belong, to proclaim that we will never be able to be happy, [if we are set] one against another. . . . Never can the future of humanity be ensured by terrorism and the logic of war.”

Reporting the Pope’s call, the Vatican daily *Osservatore Romano* ran on its front page, twice, the word “never” in giant letters: “NEVER Terrorism and NEVER War”