

Vatican appeals for former Iraqi leader's life

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) The Vatican on Tuesday (Oct. 26) called for former Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz to be spared the death penalty, and suggested it might intervene diplomatically on his behalf.

"The position of the Catholic Church on the death penalty is known," said the Rev. Federico Lombardi, director of the Holy See Press Office. "It is therefore truly hoped that the sentence against Tariq Aziz will not be carried out, precisely in order to favor reconciliation and the reconstruction of peace and justice in Iraq after the great sufferings undergone there."

An Iraqi court on Tuesday condemned Aziz, 74, to death by hanging for his role in persecuting Shiite opposition parties opposed to the regime of Saddam Hussein.

Aziz, a Catholic, made a high-profile visit to the Vatican in 1998, seeking the support of Pope John Paul II in an effort to end United Nations sanctions against Iraq. He met again with John Paul in 2003, on the eve of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, which the Vatican strenuously opposed.

Lombardi raised the possibility of a "humanitarian intervention" on Aziz's behalf, noting that in such cases the "Holy See usually works not in a public way but through the diplomatic channels at its disposal."