

Catholics, Protestants urge new Iraq policy: Call torture scandal a damaging self-inflicted blow

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High-ranking Vatican diplomats are calling the Iraq torture scandal a self-inflicted blow that has caused more damage to the United States than the 2001 terrorist attacks. That stark assessment comes only weeks before President Bush is expected to meet with Pope John Paul II in Rome, and as U.S. mainstream church leaders, largely quiet as the war was under way, are again calling for changes in U.S. policy.

Deepening scandal over the abuse at Abu Ghraib prison and the treatment of civilian detainees has set the stage for renewed criticism of the overall American policy in Iraq as many Protestant and Orthodox spokespersons joined members of Congress and other political leaders calling for accountability and change.

“Such abuse and atrocities are the consequence of war, and especially military occupation,” said Jim Wallis of *Sojourners*, a progressive evangelical journal. “They always have been, and they will continue to be. Here is the real issue: the Americans and the British do not belong in Iraq. The American-led occupation is leading to more suffering on all sides, and it will just get worse.”

Denominational heads, signing on to a rare pastoral letter issued May 12 through the National Council of Churches, called the U.S. policy in Iraq “dangerous for America and the world” and said it “will only lead to further violence.” Addressing members of 36 Protestant and Orthodox communions in the NCC, the leaders said: “We, therefore, call for a change of course in Iraq, and we encourage you to do the same. Specifically, we are calling upon our country to turn over the transition of authority and postwar reconstruction to the United Nations—and to recognize U.S. responsibility to contribute to this effort generously through security, economic and humanitarian support—not only to bring international legitimacy to the effort, but also to foster any chance for lasting peace.”

In another letter commenting on the Iraq situation, William G. Sinkford, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, said while he was dispirited and angered by the photographs of prisoner abuse, "I am saddened and frustrated by the grinding progress of this war, this unending occupation which seems to hold no prospect of a positive outcome."

At the Vatican, Archbishop Giovanni Lajolo, the foreign minister, told the Rome newspaper *La Repubblica* that if the Bush administration had listened to the arguments of the pope against war on Iraq, it would have nothing to regret today. His mid-May statement was the strongest yet from the Vatican on the deepening crisis. Like his American counterparts, Lajolo called for UN intervention, the handing over of power to an Iraqi leader and a clear calendar for the restoration of full sovereignty and independence to Iraq.

The Italian Pax Christi organization expressed hope that Bush's June 4 audience with John Paul could help speed the process of restoring peace to Iraq. Meanwhile, Archbishop Fernano Filoni, the Vatican envoy to Baghdad, said to the Italian monthly *30 Days* that the torture scandal had seriously compromised the credibility of the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq and he doubted it could be won back. He said almost every Iraqi he meets feels "indignation and disillusionment."

Lajolo said the scandal was "a heavier blow to the United States than September 11, particularly [because] the blow was not inflicted by terrorists but by the Americans on themselves." The Vatican official called the scandal involving U.S. servicemen and women degrading and termed the torturing of Iraqi prisoners "tragic for relations with Islam."

Added Lajolo: "Even if intelligent people in the Arab countries are able to understand that in democracies, actions of this kind are not acceptable and are punished while in Iraq under the past regime and in totalitarian regimes this does not happen, nevertheless the great mass of people—under the influence of the Arab mass media—can only feel aversion and hate for the West grow in themselves."

Noting the pope's sustained efforts to persuade Washington not to wage war on Iraq, Lajolo said, "Certainly, the pope has spoken very clearly. If they had listened to him, now they would not have so many regrets because violence calls up violence, war calls up war." To end the war in Iraq, he urged UN intervention. "Even if the United Nations was excluded at the start of the war, now it is necessary that the UN intervene to put an end to the war," the prelate said. —Peggy Polk and David

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