

From the desk of Fr. Jim

DURING THIS TIME OF CONTINUING CONFLICT

The following is excerpted from Archbishop Edwin O'Brien's Memorial Day message to the troops and their families. Archbishop O'Brien is Archbishop of the Archdiocese for Military Services.

"As our divided nation continues to search for an honorable and morally responsible end to our military involvement in Iraq, the four years that have elapsed since the start of our incursion compel an assessment of our current circumstances and the continuing obligation of the church to provide a moral framework for public discussion."

"It is particularly important that as archbishop for our Catholic armed forces I offer some points for moral and pastoral guidance to you and to your families as you continue to bear a disproportionate share of the burdens brought on by our present national policies."

"The position of the Holy See through the many statements of Pope John Paul II is well known: that all efforts toward a peaceful resolution of the differences between Iraq and the U.S. (and its allies) had not been pursued. In addition, with its intimate knowledge of the historical and contemporary sectarian complexities of the Middle East and of Iraq in particular, the Holy See feared an ominous and long-term escalation of violence throughout the area with gravely negative repercussions for the people of the region and the fragile Christian presence there. Unfortunately, such has been the case."

[The Archbishop here recalled pertinent points in the history of the Iraq War. These are omitted because of the limitations of space. The most salient and encouraging points are to be found in the following conclusion.]

THE PATH AHEAD

Permit me now to offer a concluding few thoughts:

1. At no time has the Holy See or the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops cast doubt on the motives of our national leadership in the executive or congressional branches.
2. The unleashing of sectarian violence with hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians killed, wounded or displaced seems to confirm the initial fears that this conflict would have significant adverse consequences for the people of Iraq.
3. At this stage, our nation must honestly assess what is achievable in Iraq using the traditional just war principle of "probability of success," including the probability of contributing to a responsible transition. Our troops should remain in Iraq only as long as their presence contributes to a responsible transition.

4. Unless it is concluded that a responsible transition is not achievable, the U.S. and its allies also have a grave responsibility, even at high cost, to help Iraqis secure and rebuild their nation.

5. Meanwhile, political and military leadership must evaluate the moral and human consequences of every possible alternative cause of action in light of the goal of a responsible transition.

CONCLUSION

Finally, I would again quote from Pope Benedict XVI's words to the military ordinaries assembled in Rome for our fifth international congress last fall:

"From within the military world, the church will continue to offer her specific service to the formation of consciences, certain that God's word, liberally scattered and courageously guided by the service of charity and truth, will bear fruit in its own good time."

"While that is what this letter attempts to do, I am well aware of the daily spiritual support and moral guidance offered to you by our generous and courageous chaplains who serve side by side with you, often in the most perilous of circumstances. The church in our land owes them a profound debt of gratitude, as all of America does to you and to your families.

May your sacrifices, offered out of selfless love of neighbor, soon bring about that responsible and peaceful transition for which all of us hope and pray each day."

Continue to pray for our troops, especially those who are in harm's way. Even though there may be a division of opinion about how to proceed in this present conflict, while we debate in comfort and security, our men and women in the military and the civilian population in Iraq suffer and die. Pray also for those who have been injured, crippled and forever scarred by the unimaginable violence of war. They have paid a high price. Do not forget them. Pray also for God's gifts of courage and perseverance, for these sustain our troops every day. Remember the families that wait every moment of every day for the smallest piece of news. May they have the resources they need especially signs of care from their friends and their country.

A Church

O Lord Jesus Christ, who in Thy mercy hears the prayers of sinners, pour forth, we beseech Thee, all grace and blessing upon our country and its citizens. We pray in particular for the President, for our Congress, for all our soldiers, for all who defend us in ships, whether on the seas or in the skies, for all who are suffering the hardships of war. We pray for all who are in peril or in danger. Bring us all, after the troubles of this life, into the haven of peace, and reunite us all together forever, O dear Lord, in Thy glorious heavenly kingdom. (From Fulton Sheen's "Wartime Prayer Book")