



Lenten Message from Denver bishops

March 5 , 2003

This year the Holy Father's Lenten message — "It is more blessed to give than to receive" — is overshadowed by the real possibility of war in the Middle East. As the world moves closer to armed conflict, two contradictions stand out.

First, while Americans increasingly talk about the prospect of war in Iraq, many of us act as if it were just another news story — a very serious one, but finally a kind of simulation or televised special event. Our news media report serious stories every day, and Iraq sits well over the horizon and beyond our personal concern. So unless we know someone in the military who has been called to active duty, the crisis in the Gulf seems largely unconnected to our daily routines.

This is extremely dangerous, because a nation that does not understand the cost of war too readily sees it as a solution. Iraq 2003 is not Iraq 1991. Once the fighting starts, the outcome cannot be predicted — powerful nations have regretted "little" wars in the past, including the recent past — and the results will be determined by bullets and blood, not by news analysts. Men and women will die. American and Iraqi families will suffer. The Holy See's urgency in pressing for peace flows directly from the Church's identity as our mother: a mother who loves her children and, from the perspective of history, sees far better than they do the consequences of their actions.

Second, the tens of thousands who have protested the American buildup in the Gulf over the past several months must also work for change in Iraq with equal clamor and energy. Otherwise we will not prevent war; we will merely delay it. The Iraq crisis is not simply an American invention. The record of the Saddam Hussein regime is one of genocide, criminality, contempt for international agreements, aggression against neighbors and repression at home. These are facts, and the international community — and the United Nations in particular — has gravely weakened its own credibility by allowing them to continue for so long.

As Paul VI wrote, if we want peace, we need to work for justice. That applies equally to leaders of the United States, leaders of countries in the Middle East, and leaders of the international community. Peace is still within reach if the leaders involved honestly seek it.

The Holy Father has asked Catholics around the world to dedicate their prayers and fasting on Ash Wednesday, March 5, to the intention of world peace. Lent this year is unlike any in the recent past. May God grant all of us the wisdom to use these coming weeks in the work of personal repentance and conversion, so that through our renewal and the help of His grace, we can become God's agents of renewal and peace in the world.

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