

Church leaders on the Middle East crisis: Lajolo

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 28, 2006 All Things Catholic

The Vatican took part as an observer in the International Conference for Lebanon held in Rome on Wednesday, sending a three-member delegation led by Archbishop Giovanni Lajolo, the Secretary for Relations with States. Two officials from the Secretariat of State accompanied him, Monsignors Franco Coppola and Alberto Ortega Martin.

Both Coppola and Ortega Martin are veterans of the tortured politics of the Middle East.

Coppola was the chief advisor to Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, former president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, during a February 2003 mission to Baghdad in an ultimately unsuccessful effort to avert the U.S.-led invasion. When then- Iraqi Prime Minister Ayad Allawi visited John Paul II in 2004, Coppola was again part of the Vatican's team. Ortega Martin, meanwhile, served in the Holy See's embassy in Lebanon, in Harissa, which is the See of the Maronite Christian Patriarch.

On Thursday, the Vatican Press Office released the text of a Vatican Radio interview with Lajolo about the Rome Summit.

What's your evaluation of the conference?

It was certainly positive that it was convened so quickly by an initiative of the Italian government, and that it concentrated its attention on the most urgent themes of the moment.

Its conclusions were, however, seen as rather disappointing. What's your opinion?

Certainly, public expectations were rather high, but for those involved in the work who know its difficulties, one can perhaps say that the results are admirable. I'd like to point out above all four positive aspects:

1. The fact that countries from different parts of the world, from Canada to Russia, came together in awareness of the gravity of what's happening in Lebanon, reaffirming the necessity that it recover as quickly as possible its full sovereignty, and committed themselves to giving it help;
2. The request that an international force be formed, under a mandate of the United Nations, that can support the regular Lebanese forces in matters of security;
3. The commitment for immediate humanitarian aid to the people of Lebanon, and the assurance of support for reconstruction, with the convocation of a Donors' Conference. Various participating countries have already set aside substantial assistance, but it's still insufficient to cover the enormous needs of the

country;

4. The commitment among participants, after the official closure of the conference, to remain in continual contact regarding ongoing developments that the intervention of the international community in Lebanon will have.

What created the impression of disappointment?

Above all, the fact that an immediate end to hostilities was not requested. Unanimity among participants was not reached because some countries believed the appeal would not have the desired effect, and that it's more realistic to express a commitment to obtaining as quickly as possible an end to hostilities, a commitment that can in fact be maintained.

It's also problematic that [the summit] limited itself solely to inviting Israel to exercise the maximum moderation: such an invitation carries by its very nature a certain ambiguity, but concern for the innocent civilian population is a precise and uncompromising duty.

What was the evaluation of the Lebanese government?

On the one hand, [Lebanese] Prime Minister [Fouad] Siniora had the opportunity to outline the dramatic character of the situation facing the country, and he presented his plan for the immediate and definitive resolution of the conflict with Israel; on the other, he was able to note, and ultimately to encourage, the positive efforts the international community is making for bringing relief to the Lebanese people, for putting an end to the hostilities, and for reinforcing the control of his government over his country.

Yesterday afternoon Prime Minister Siniora, accompanied by [Lebanese] Foreign Minister [Fawzi] Salloukh, asked for a meeting with Cardinal Sodano and with me. He expressed great appreciation for the commitment with which the Holy Father personally, and the Holy See, are following the conflict that has gripped Lebanon, and beseeched us to continue to support his country in the international arena. He recalled the words of Pope John Paul II, who defined Lebanon not merely as a country but as a "message," for all peoples, of balanced coexistence among different religions and confessions in the same state. This, certainly, is the historical vocation of Lebanon, which it must be able to realize. The Holy See will continue to use all the means at its disposition so that the country returns to being that "garden" of the Middle East that it was before.

In your capacity as an observer, were you able to influence the work of the Summit?

The observers did not have the right to speak, and I was not asked to do so. I believe, however, that even the silent presence of the Holy See as an observer at the table of the Heads of Delegations had meaning, which was clearly perceptible.

After the Summit, what's the position of the Holy See?

The Holy See remains in favor of an immediate suspension of hostilities. The problems on the table are multiple and extremely complex. Precisely for this reason, they cannot be confronted all at once: while keeping in mind the broader context and the global solution to be reached, it's necessary to resolve the problems one by one, beginning with those that can be solved right away. The position of those who believe that conditions first have to be created so that a truce is not violated again reflects only a superficial realism, because those conditions can only be, and must be, created with means other than the killing of innocent persons. The pope is close to those populations which are victims of strife and of a conflict to which they are strangers. Benedict XVI prays, and all the church with him, that the day of peace will be today and not tomorrow. He prays to God and supplicates the

responsible political leaders. The pope weeps with every mother who mourns her children, with every person who weeps for their loved ones. An immediate end to hostilities is possible, and therefore obligatory.

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