

When our nation went to war against Iraq on Wednesday, the American bishops issued a statement saying our first obligation now is prayer for those most directly affected by this war and solidarity with those who will suffer from it. A few days before the war began, Pope John Paul II called upon the leaders of Iraq “to cooperate fully with the international community, to eliminate any motive for armed intervention.” Our bishops have expressed deep regret that war was not avoided. They stand by their concerns and questions about the use of force in this case, but they also understand and respect the difficult moral choices that must be made by our President and those responsible for the security of our nation and the world. The pope has asked Catholics to dedicate this Lent to reflection, prayer and fasting that the trials and tragedy of war will soon be replaced by a just and lasting peace.

One of the features of Lent is the prayer we offer for those who will be baptized at Easter each year. Our custom of prayer and fasting during Lent began in the early church with the preparation that catechumens made for baptism. Today, Lent has both aspects in the typical Catholic parish: a preparation for those unbaptized, and a time of repentance for those who are baptized. Tonight and the next two Saturdays we will offer special prayers for those to be baptized at Easter this year. They are anxious to join us at the eucharist, and they rely on our prayer and example.

A good Lent will make people hungry. The elect hunger for baptism. The faithful hunger to eat meat on Fridays again. You may hunger for something you’ve given up for Lent. Our world hungers for peace and security, for meaningful diplomacy and trust among nations. We are hungry and thirsty for God to show justice to the needy.

In today’s first reading Israel in the desert grumbled against Moses for food, homeland and security. People feared that they, their children and their livestock would all perish in the desert. The desert is a hard place. Without food, people questioned the decency of their leader Moses. They also questioned God. “Is the Lord in our midst or not?” they wondered. God brought Israel to freedom, but first they passed through great danger. If you make Lent a desert, if you pray and fast, Lent will raise hard questions. But if you get the hard questions satisfied, you can endure any desert.

This evening as we pray for the elect, let us reflect on our hungers. In times of turmoil, we are hungry, we are thirsty, we question our leadership and even whether or not God is in our midst. But if we come through the desert of Lent, we will rise to a glorious Easter.

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A few days before the war began, Pope John Paul II again asked the United States to avoid the conflict and again called upon the leaders of Iraq to cooperate fully with the international community and eliminate any motive for armed intervention. Yesterday the pope said, “When war, as in these day in Iraq, threatens the fate of humanity, it is ever more urgent to proclaim, with a strong and decisive voice, that only peace is the road to follow to construct a more just and united society.” He said violence and arms can never resolve our problems. On Ash Wednesday Pope John Paul asked Catholics to dedicate this Lent to reflection, prayer and fasting that the trials and tragedy of war will soon be replaced by a just and lasting peace.

A good place to begin working for peace is in today’s first reading, the Ten Commandments. When I was in grade school learning the commandments we figured out that some were harder to keep than others. As kids, we could easily slip on 4, 7 and 8 – we disobeyed our parents, we stole and we lied. I didn’t think I was breaking the sixth commandment, “You shall not commit adultery,” but nobody ever explained that one to me very well. “Worry about that when you’re an adult,” my fourth grade teacher said, and most of us have been worried about it ever since. The Ten Commandments teach good relationships with God and with our neighbor.

They continue to challenge our culture. If you post God’s law in a public place in our country, you may be breaking America’s law. It is hard to keep commandments like “You shall not kill” in abortion clinics and on battlefields. You have to wonder if difficulties like that prompt our legal system to remove the commandments from the public eye.

During Lent we reflect on our own obedience to the Law of God and during this war we pray for our troops and for those who suffer. In the covenant we receive the gift of eternal life, but God expects something from us, to observe the commands of Christ. At the beginning Lent, we committed ourselves to a period of prayer, fasting and almsgiving. May our actions help bring peace to our heart, to our homes and to our world.
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