

Israel's military operation against Palestinians has destroyed crops, stores, irrigation systems, greenhouses and facilities. Combatants on both sides have killed civilians. Journalists do not have free access to battle areas. Children cannot go to school. Parents cannot go to work. Many homes are without food, water or electricity. International relief personnel want to distribute humanitarian aid, but curfews inhibit them. People in the Middle East live in fear of violence, but they also live with needless hunger and isolation.

Earlier this month Palestinian troops took refuge inside one of Christianity's holiest shrines, the church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. We don't know exactly where Jesus was born, but this church is the place pilgrims go to honor the birth of Christ. Thirty Franciscan friars and sisters live there. Parts of that historic church are now destroyed.

About two weeks ago Catholic Relief Services helped organize a convoy to deliver 1000 packages of one-month food rations to communities in and around Bethlehem. Relief convoys are also approaching other areas where people cannot obtain basic foodstuffs and where the curfew has to be lifted for a convoy of food to enter.

Leaders around the world have called on Israel to withdraw its troops and for Palestinians to join in sincere efforts for peace. The bishops of our country asked President Bush earlier this month to press for an immediate cease-fire and a return to the arduous task of negotiating a just peace. Bishop Wilton Gregory says the elements of a just and lasting peace remain the same: a viable state for Palestinians, real security for the state of Israel, a just resolution of the refugee problem, an agreement on Jerusalem that respects religious freedom, and the observance of the resolutions passed by the United Nations.

The Vatican has added to this list the unequivocal condemnation of terrorism, from whatever side it comes; an end to the injustice and humiliation of the Palestinian people; and the obligation of both sides to safeguard the holy places of Islam, Judaism and Christianity.

At the Last Supper, Jesus opened his farewell discourse by telling the disciples he was leaving, but he would return to get

them. "Where I am going," he says, "you know the way."
Thomas said, "Master, we do not know where you are going;
how can we know the way?" Jesus responds, "I am the way."
Whatever the scale of the conflict, whether it is among nations
or within families, we do not always see where we are going, and
that is fearsome. But we can know the way. When we walk the
way of Christ, we find truth and life.