

# **Bishop: Iraqi Christian community undergoing own Calvary**

LONDON – An English bishop asked Catholics in England and Wales to mark the fifth anniversary of the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq by praying for the Iraqi Christian community, which is “undergoing its own Calvary.”

“In the midst of continuing conflict and instability we should all reflect on the lessons that need to be learned and ask how we can contribute to creating a better future for Iraq,” said Bishop Crispian Hollis of Portsmouth, England, chairman of the Department of International Affairs of the Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales.

“Above all, we need to remember the people of Iraq as they struggle to rebuild their country,” he said March 18. “In particular, we ask you to hold in your prayers the Christian community.”

He said the plight of Iraqi Christians had been “brought home with terrible force” by the Feb. 29 abduction and subsequent killing of Chaldean Catholic Archbishop Paulos Faraj Rahho of Mosul, Iraq.

“British military personnel, and the chaplains who accompany them, continue to serve with distinction, and they and their families are also in our prayers at this time,” he said.

British troops were part of the U.S.-led coalition that invaded Iraq March 20, 2003, although the anniversary is marked in Western countries March 19 because of the time difference. Afterward British troops were based around the southern port of Basra.

Approximately 175 British armed services personnel have died in the country since 2003. In December they withdrew from Basra, but 4,000 troops remain in the country, mostly at a base near the Basra airport.

The U.K. branch of Pax Christi, the international Catholic peace movement, planned

to mark the fifth anniversary of the invasion with an early evening prayer vigil March 19 outside Downing Street, the London residence of British Prime Minister Gordon Brown. It will include the reading of some of the names of British and U.S. military personnel who have died in the conflict as well as those of Iraqi civilians.

Pat Gaffney, general secretary of Pax Christi U.K., told Catholic News Service March 19, "We will be urging our government to make reparation for the destruction we have caused and calling on all people of good will to join efforts to bring stability and peace to Iraq."

Protests were also planned across the U.S.

The war has been unpopular in Britain and in the United States, although an Associated Press-Ipsos poll in December showed that growing numbers of Americans think the U.S. is making progress and will eventually be able to claim some success in Iraq.

Nearly 4,000 U.S. armed forces personnel have died in Iraq since the U.S. invasion. The conflict has so far cost the U.S. taxpayers about \$500 billion.

Conservative estimates put the Iraqi death toll at about 89,000 people, while 4.3 million have been displaced, including more than 600,000 Iraqi Christians.