

# **Bush, Catholic community discuss poverty, war, Iraqi Christians**

ROME – U.S. President George W. Bush praised the Catholic lay Community of Sant'Egidio for being part of an “international army of compassion” that helps the poor.

Bush met with what he called “one of the great faith-based organizations in the world” to flesh out ways the U.S. government and Sant'Egidio could further their “common commitment to help the poor, feed the hungry and help eradicate disease.”

The round-table discussion June 9 had been requested by the White House and was held in the U.S. Embassy to Italy rather than the Sant'Egidio headquarters in the center of Rome due to security concerns.

Present for the hourlong, closed-door meeting were eight representatives from Sant'Egidio, including its founder, Andrea Riccardi. Among the U.S. delegates attending were U.S. Ambassador to the Vatican Francis Rooney, White House Chief of Staff Josh Bolten and U.S. Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte.

The president of Sant'Egidio, Marco Impagliazzo, told reporters after the meeting that it was “like a fairy tale” getting a call saying Bush wanted to meet with the community, which has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize several times for its work in conflict resolution.

Impagliazzo said he told Bush that many peace negotiations end up becoming “a circus” with too much fanfare and too little substance to show for it. Bush reportedly told them, “Well, give me an example of positive negotiations where it isn't a circus.”

The community delegates explained their secret to mediation is creating “a mixture of diplomacy and friendship.” With civil wars in Mozambique, Ivory Coast, Kosovo and now the Darfur region of Sudan, the community's primary aim has been to get factions opposing the government to agree on a common platform for negotiations.

Sant'Egidio delegates told Bush their ideas on how to proceed with getting

negotiations off the ground to bring peace in Darfur, but said they “received no explicit request” from Bush for help.

Impagliazzo said Bush praised the group for being “problem solvers” and was impressed with their long history of working for peace and fighting poverty.

“Responding to this,” Impagliazzo said they reminded the president that “war is the mother of all poverty.”

He said they did not talk about the U.S.-led war in Iraq, though Sant’Egidio delegates did express their concern for the plight of Iraq’s Christians and their fear that Christians risked becoming an enclave in northern Iraq. Impagliazzo said Bush did not comment on the matter.

The June 9 encounter also focused on the situation in Africa and how HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, poverty and malnutrition could be fought more effectively.

Bush said at the start of the round table that “the United States is firmly committed to helping the people on the continent of Africa,” and he highlighted the billions of dollars being appropriated by Congress to fight disease and promote education there.

Bush said “these programs cannot be effective without loving people on the ground helping a neighbor in need.”

Mario Marazziti, spokesman for the Sant’Egidio Community, told reporters that its HIV/AIDS program in Africa is one of “the most effective ones for its results in fighting malnutrition and AIDS.” The program, Drug Enhancement against AIDS and Malnutrition, or DREAM, includes HIV testing, counseling and free drug therapy in 10 African countries.

Patients are also treated for other diseases like tuberculosis and malaria and are offered better nutrition and clean water, Marazziti said.

He said community members told Bush that the program “was replicable beyond Africa” and that they were ready to help other organizations and governments spread the initiative.

The Sant'Egidio Community delegates also told Bush of their concern for the 50 million children in the world who go unregistered at birth.

Impagliazzo said Bush was visibly moved after hearing nearly 70 percent of all African infants are not registered by any government.

These so-called "invisible children" are not only denied the right to vote and receive an education and other benefits, they also are extremely vulnerable to exploitation since the children do not exist officially.

Impagliazzo said Sant'Egidio members told Bush of their project in Ivory Coast aimed at helping all of Africa's children get registered, and he said Bush immediately asked Negroponte to follow up on the issue with U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.