

Iraqi Christians were safer under Saddam

VATICAN CITY - Although Iraq has a democratic government, Iraqi Christians were safer and had more protection under former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, said the future head of the Vatican's interreligious dialogue council.

During the buildup to the U.S.-led invasion in 2003, French Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, who will become head of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue Sept. 1, had criticized the U.S. government's plan of preventative war and said a unilateral war against Iraq would be a "crime against peace."

In a recent interview with the Italian magazine 30 Giorni, the cardinal said his early criticisms had been prophetic.

"The facts speak for themselves. Alienating the international community (with the U.S. push for war) was a mistake," he said in the magazine's Aug. 10 issue. A copy of the interview was released in advance to journalists.

He said an "unjust approach" was used to unseat Saddam from power, resulting in the mounting chaos in Iraq today.

"Power is in the hands of the strongest - the Shiites - and the country is sinking into a sectarian civil war (between Sunni and Shiite Muslims) in which not even Christians are spared," he said.

Christians, "paradoxically, were more protected under the dictatorship," he said.

Cardinal Tauran is a longtime veteran of the Vatican's diplomatic service and a specialist in international affairs. He was Pope John Paul II's "foreign minister," the official who dealt with all aspects of the Vatican's foreign policy from 1990 to 2003.

He said his new appointment as head of the interreligious dialogue council carries "great responsibility" but that he also sees it "as a new chapter in my service to the Holy See." The cardinal will be responsible for overseeing the Vatican's dialogue efforts with representatives of non-Christian religions, including Islam.

His June 25 appointment alleviated concerns that Pope Benedict XVI's temporary merger of the presidencies of the Vatican's interreligious dialogue council with the Pontifical Council for Culture indicated a downgrading of the Vatican's interfaith efforts.

Cardinal Tauran told 30 Giorni, "We have to do everything so that religions spread

brotherhood and not hatred.”

The Vatican’s efforts at bridge-building with Muslims hit a speed bump when the pope’s remarks on Islam in a September speech in Regensburg, Germany, prompted negative reactions across the Muslim world.

When asked if the pope’s Regensburg address had compromised the Vatican’s dialogue efforts with Muslims, the cardinal replied, “At first, yes.”

“But later, especially during his subsequent trip to Turkey, the pope explained himself very well,” the cardinal said.

He said Pope Benedict has great respect for Muslims.

The controversies that arose after Regensburg only highlighted the importance of having a specific Vatican department dedicated to dialogue with Islam and other religions, he said.

“Thank God the erroneous interpretations of the Regensburg speech did not stop the development of relations – diplomatic, too – with Islamic nations,” he said, giving the example of the recent establishment of full diplomatic relations between the United Arab Emirates and the Vatican.

Cardinal Tauran said that as head of the Vatican’s interreligious dialogue office he would use as his guide the Second Vatican Council’s declaration on relations with non-Christian religions, “Nostra Aetate.”

“To examine everything humanity has in common ... and to appreciate how much truth and holiness there is in other religions” would be some of the council’s goals, he said.

But the quest to understand others will leave room to courageously pay witness to “the way, truth, and life” of Jesus, he said.

“In this sense,” he said, “our road map is obviously the declaration ‘Dominus Iesus,’” the 2000 document of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith which said Christ and the church are necessary for salvation.

Interreligious dialogue should not promote the idea that all religions are equal, he said, but that all religions “which are seeking God must be respected because they have the same dignity.”