

Papal events with Bush don't signal approval of policies

VATICAN CITY - Pope Benedict XVI's upcoming visit to the White House to meet with U.S. President George W. Bush does not signal Vatican support of the Bush administration's foreign policies, a Vatican official said.

The April 15-16 encounters with the president when the pope arrives in the U.S. and at the White House should "absolutely not" be seen as support of Bush and his stance on Iraq, said Cardinal Renato Martino, president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and a longtime Vatican diplomat.

The cardinal spoke to reporters April 11 during a break in an international conference on disarmament sponsored by the Vatican council.

"The pope and the Holy See cannot renounce with one visit all the Holy See's positions of rejecting war, always encouraging dialogue to smooth over disagreements and fostering cooperation," he said.

He said the argument that U.S.-led troops have to remain in Iraq in order to bring security and protect the Christian minority is open to question.

"Obviously the main error was to start a war, a second war" after the Gulf War against Iraq in 1991, he said.

But whether it is wise to keep troops in Iraq is "a very difficult judgment" to make because some analysts say "the daily slaughter that unfolds in Iraq" is rooted in the continued presence of foreign troops, said the Italian cardinal.

Cardinal Martino, who served as the Vatican's permanent observer to the United Nations, 1986-2002, said he and others at the U.N. "did everything" to prevent what they saw as unjust attacks against Iraq in 1991.

However, Vatican lobbying and repeated papal appeals against the 2003 war against Iraq failed, he said.

"But this does not mean the pope's role (in calling for a peaceful resolution to conflict) is useless," said Cardinal Martino.

The pope's role is much like the priest urging his flock "to follow the Ten Commandments. It's then up to us to follow them or not," he said.

The pope has a duty to "prophetically proclaim peace" everywhere the threat of war looms, he added.