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WASHINGTON (ABP)—Baptists in Italy—a nation President Bush counts as an ally in the Iraq war—are asking their American counterparts to help bring an end to that conflict.

In a recent letter, the Italian Baptist Union's president, Anna Maffei, asked “all the Baptist conventions in the U.S.A.” to join together in efforts toward reconciliation rather than encouraging further military conflict in war-torn Iraq.

Messengers to the union's general assembly last month authorized the appeal for peacemaking.

Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's conservative government has been one of only a handful in the world to join Bush's “Coalition of the Willing” in support of the United States' efforts in Iraq.

Italian Baptists chose to address U.S. Baptists, Maffei said, “because we

thought that our Baptist churches in the U.S.A., on account of their number and strength, could make a difference in the world and contribute a great deal, if they so wished, to develop peace strategies in the international arena. As sons and daughters of the Prince of Peace, we desperately need to struggle for peace and justice!"

Noting the war's cost in dollars, the lives of coalition troops and those of Iraqi fighters and civilians, the letter lambastes the war, calling it "mistaken and counterproductive," "illegal" and "bloody."

"The (Italian and U.S. governments') objective is to guarantee Iraqis the possibility of having democratic elections; but democracy cannot be imposed by war," the letter reads. "The war has instead caused terrorism to flare up in a land where there wasn't any before and has restricted democracy in the countries involved in the war, through security measures, clamping down on the right to protest and the tampering with the question of freedom of information."

It continues: "We all watch, with anguish and a sense of impotence, the news reels showing the massacre of innocents, produced by terrorist suicide bombers and car bombs and by coalition missiles, following the law of 'an eye for an eye.'"

It also criticizes the Italian and American governments' rhetoric surrounding the war. "We all see our leaders, in the same vein as the exponents of Islamic fundamentalism and of terrorism, waving the flag, talking of a war between civilizations and claiming that God is on their side.

"We believe that God, who said, 'You shall not kill' and who sent Jesus to die for our sin, is a God of peace, of reconciliation and of justice—that he is on the side of the victims of war, whoever they are, military or civilian, Iraqi, American, widows, parents, orphans, prisoners, whole peoples reduced to misery and famine."

The letter asks U.S. Baptists for two responses:

To organize peacemaking-focused “manifestations, round tables, focus groups, meetings for reflection on the alternative to war, that involve people of diverse religious confession, cultural tendency and nationality.”

- ◆ To lead “ecumenical prayer meetings in which we pray that God touches our leaders' hearts and those of terrorist and resistance leaders and that he brings them to repent, to change direction, to stop the fighting and open up a dialogue with their enemies,” and to encourage the exchange of coalition forces “for U.N.-led peacekeeping forces” to occupy the country.

A spokesperson for the Baptist World Alliance, a worldwide umbrella group for Baptists, said the letter appears directed at the Southern Baptist Convention, because it is the only U.S. Baptist group to express official support for the war.

“My feeling is that the main people to whom they would direct that-I'm making a judgment call-would really not listen to them or have any concern about them,” said Wendy Ryan, noting BWA had not formulated an official response.

In 2003, the Southern Baptist Convention approved a resolution affirming Bush for the war in Iraq and noting, “We believe Operation Iraqi Freedom was a warranted action based upon historic principles of just war.”

SBC officials had not responded to requests for comments. A spokesperson for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship said the organization would not have a response until leaders had a chance to review the letter.

Richard Schramm, a spokesperson for the American Baptist Churches U.S.A., said he was not aware of any official response to the letter from that organization.

Gary Percesepe, coordinating director of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, endorsed the Italian Baptist statement, which he said “call(s) on the churches to express clearly the prophetic message of Jesus Christ that there is a third way open to us, an alternative to war, rather than the false dichotomy of 'fight or flight.'”

“We call for active and courageous nonviolent resistance to evil, following the example of Jesus,” added Percesepe of Springfield, Ohio. “We call for the abolition of war and the embracing of Jesus' ethic of love for one's enemies.”

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