Bishops' Statements on Iraq

Letter to The Honorable Tim Ryan
From Most Reverend Thomas G. Wenski
Chairman, Committee on International Policy
July 17, 2007

In November 2006, our Conference expressed the hope that the report of the bipartisan Iraq Study Group would lead to the candid assessments and honest dialogue that our nation needs to find a responsible way to end U.S. military engagement in Iraq. We subsequently noted with satisfaction that the Iraq Study Group shared our goal of a “responsible transition.” Although as bishops and pastors we have not taken positions on all of the detailed proposals in that Report, its broad outlines mirror the benchmarks and new approaches that our Conference has advocated in promoting a “responsible transition” with U.S. troops leaving “sooner rather than later.”

U.S. military action in Iraq brought with it new moral responsibilities toward the Iraqi people. For more than a year and a half our Conference has called for a “responsible transition” and withdrawal in Iraq. In January 2006, our Conference stated: “Our nation’s military forces should remain in Iraq only as long as their presence contributes to a responsible transition. Our nation should look for effective ways to end their deployment at the earliest opportunity consistent with this goal.”

Our Conference has expressed particular concerns for Christians and other minority groups who have suffered in the aftermath of military action in Iraq along with the rest of the Iraqi population. In a special way, our nation must make provisions for refugees who have fled their native land in search of safety and security for their families.

In our most recent public statement this year, our Conference reminded policy makers that each course of action in Iraq ought to be evaluated in light of its moral and human consequences and the traditional principle of “probability of success.” The moral measure of “probability of success” weighs more heavily with each passing month.

Our Conference is under no illusions regarding Iraq. None of the alternative courses of action are without consequences for human life and dignity. There is no path ahead that leads to an unambiguously good outcome for Iraq, our nation and the world. It was for this very reason that we raised serious moral questions regarding military intervention in Iraq in the first place. Nevertheless, our nation must have the moral courage to change course in Iraq and to break the policy and political stalemate in Washington so that we can walk a difficult path that does the most good and the least damage in human and moral terms.

Excerpts from
"Bishop Wilton D. Gregory's
Statement on Iraq"
February 26, 2003

As pastors and teachers, we understand that there are no easy answers. People of good will may differ on how traditional norms apply in this situation. The gravity of the threat and whether force would be preemptive are matters of debate, as are the potential consequences of using or failing to use military force. We urge Catholics, especially lay men and women who are called to be "leaven" in society, to continue to think deeply about the choices we face, to review carefully the teaching of our Church and to speak out strongly in accord with their conscience. Our hearts and prayers go out especially to those who may bear the burden of these terrible choices -- the men and women of our armed forces and their families, the people of Iraq, and the leaders of our nation and world who face momentous decisions of life and death, of war and peace.

Excerpts from
"United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Statement on Iraq
November 13, 2002

While we cannot predict what will happen in the coming weeks, we wish to reiterate questions of ends and means that may still have to be addressed. We offer not definitive conclusions, but rather our serious concerns and questions in the hope of helping all of us to reach sound moral judgments. People of good will may differ on how to apply just war norms in particular cases, especially when events are moving rapidly and the facts are not altogether clear. Based on the facts that are known to us, we continue to find it difficult to justify the resort to war against Iraq, lacking clear and adequate evidence of an imminent attack of a grave nature. With the Holy See and bishops from the Middle East and around the world, we fear that resort to war, under present circumstances and in light of current public information, would not meet the strict conditions in Catholic teaching for overriding the strong presumption against the use of military force.*

There are no easy answers. Ultimately, our elected leaders are responsible for decisions about national security, but we hope that our moral concerns and questions will be considered seriously by our leaders and all citizens. We invite others, particularly Catholic lay people -- who have the principal responsibility to transform the social order in light of the Gospel -- to continue to discern how best to live out their vocation to be "witnesses and agents of peace and justice" (Catechism, #2442). As Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers" (Mt. 5).

We pray for all those most likely to be affected by this potential conflict, especially the suffering people of Iraq and the men and women who serve in our armed forces. We support those who risk their lives in the service of our nation. We also support those who seek to exercise their right to conscientious objection and selective conscientious objection, as we have stated in the past.