

U.S. Bishops' Statement on War in Iraq

"Our Nation and Its Leaders Face Important Decisions"

BALTIMORE, Maryland, NOV. 13, 2007 (Zenit.org).- Here is the statement of Bishop William Skylstad of Spokane, president of the U.S. episcopal conference, on the war in Iraq. The statement was affirmed today by the fall meeting of the U.S. bishops, under way in Baltimore.

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Our nation and its leaders face important decisions about the difficult challenges and terrible dilemmas in Iraq. As the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops gathers in Baltimore, our thoughts and prayers are with our military personnel in Iraq, their families, and all the suffering people of Iraq. In this statement we seek to draw on our moral teaching to continue raising some ethical questions regarding the road ahead for our nation in Iraq.

Our Church both ministers among our troops and shares deep spiritual ties to the Church and people in Iraq. Pope Benedict XVI in his Urbi et Orbi Easter message of 2007 focused the world's attention on Iraq, a nation "torn apart by continual slaughter." As pastors and teachers, we are convinced that the current situation in Iraq remains unacceptable and unsustainable. Our Conference offers once again the goal of a "responsible transition" as an overall ethical framework for national decisions.

The dangerous political stalemate in Iraq that blocks national reconciliation finds a parallel in our own nation. We are alarmed by the political and partisan stalemate in Washington. Some policy makers seem to fail to recognize sufficiently the reality and failures in Iraq and the imperative for new directions. Others seem to fail to recognize sufficiently the potential human consequences of very rapid withdrawal. These two forms of denial have helped contribute to partisan paralysis.

As pastors, we have called for bipartisan action for almost two years. Our country needs a new direction to reduce the war's deadly toll and to bring our people together to deal with the conflict's moral and human dimensions. Our nation needs a new bipartisan approach to Iraq policy based on honest and civil dialogue. Our Conference encourages our national leaders to focus on the morally and politically demanding, but carefully limited goal of fostering a "responsible transition" and withdrawal at the earliest

opportunity consistent with that goal. The moral demands of this path begin with addressing the humanitarian crisis in Iraq and minimizing further loss of human life.

We do not have specific competence in political, economic and military strategies and do not assess particular tactics, but we can, as teachers, share a moral tradition to help inform policy choices. Our Catholic teaching on war and peace offers hard questions, not easy answers. Our nation must now focus more on the ethics of exit than on the ethics of intervention. The grave moral concerns we and others raised prior to the war now give way to new moral questions. In the current situation the traditional principles of “noncombatant immunity” and “probability of success” suggest these questions: How can we minimize the further loss of human lives? What actions will do the most good and least harm? What elements of a responsible transition are attainable? How can they be achieved? What actions should be avoided? How can decision makers take into account both the realities and setbacks in Iraq and the likely human consequences of rapid withdrawal? What are the financial costs and global consequences of continued war and occupation? And, how can our nation effectively counter the perversion of religion and ideologies that support terrorism, which in all cases merits condemnation?

Catholic teaching has long held that peace is more than the absence of war; it is built on the foundation of justice. This moral insight means that building a just peace in Iraq requires far more than military action; it demands a comprehensive political, diplomatic and economic effort.

This effort begins in Iraq, but it does not end there. For this reason, we believe sustained U.S. efforts to collaborate with the other nations, including Syria and Iran, are critically important for bringing some measure of stability to Iraq.

The responsibility for stabilizing and rebuilding Iraq rests primarily with Iraqis, but the United States as well as other nations have a practical and moral obligation to act. Given the extensive devastation in Iraq, the U.S. has a unique and inescapable obligation to continue to offer major and continuing support for economic development and reconstruction. Respect for Iraqi self-determination suggests that our nation should reiterate our pledge not to seek permanent military bases in Iraq, nor control over Iraqi oil resources.

A neglected policy priority is the dire situation of refugees outside the country, internally displaced persons within Iraq, Christians and other vulnerable minorities. The suffering of the Christian community has a particular claim on our hearts and consciences. We remain

in solidarity with the suffering Catholic Church in Iraq and welcome with joy the naming of Chaldean Patriarch Emmanuel-Karim Delly of Baghdad to the College of Cardinals by our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI.

We recognize that Christians are not alone in their plight and we reiterate our concern for the whole of the Iraqi people. A staggering two million refugees have fled Iraq; another two million Iraqis are internally displaced. The U.S. should immediately make more substantial commitments to Iraqi refugees by expanding admissions, eliminating roadblocks to resettlement, and supporting countries in the region burdened with war-related refugee populations. Extensive aid should be provided to internally displaced persons. The protection and promotion of human rights, especially religious freedom, in Iraq remain critically important.

Iraq's future stability is related to the stability of the region. This is why U.S. leadership to advance a just peace for Israelis and Palestinians is critical. The continuing failure to achieve the vision of two states living side by side in peace and justice contributes to regional instability.

Real progress toward a fair and just Israeli-Palestinian agreement would help the region and deprive extremists of a cause they exploit to promote hate and violence. In a recent letter to Secretary of State Rice our Conference has also expressed deep concern regarding the difficult situation involving our nation, the international community and Iran, and has urged caution, determination, and restraint in the use of force. The volatile situations in Pakistan and Afghanistan also raise significant moral questions and require urgent attention if regional stability is to be enhanced.

In all military actions, ethical norms require protecting civilians, using proportionate and discriminate force, rejecting torture, and fighting terrorism with nonmilitary means and the legitimate use of force when necessary. This is morally essential and also necessary for winning hearts and minds, especially in the struggle against terrorism.

Our concern for human life and dignity extends to the members of our own military. We support those who risk their lives in the service of our nation and recognize their generous commitment. U.S. policy must take into account the growing costs and consequences of a continued occupation on military personnel, their families and our nation. There is a moral obligation to deal with the human, medical, mental health and social costs of military action. Our nation must also make provisions for those who in conscience exercise their right to conscientious objection or selective conscientious

objection.

Each course of action in Iraq should be weighed in light of the traditional moral principle of "probability of success." In other words, will the action contribute to a "responsible transition" and withdrawal as soon as appropriate and possible? This principle requires our nation's leaders to be more realistic about the difficult situation in Iraq and more concerned about the likely consequences of a withdrawal that is too rapid or not rapid enough.

The morally and politically demanding, but carefully limited goal of responsible transition should aim to reduce further loss of life and to address the humanitarian crisis in Iraq, the refugee crisis in the region, the need to help rebuild the country, and human rights, especially religious freedom.

We call on Catholics and others to persist in praying for peace and those most affected by the war and to engage these moral questions. To help our people reflect on the war, Bishop Thomas G. Wenski, the Chairman of our Committee on International Policy, has prepared a summary of our Conference's perspectives on the war in question-and-answer format.

All of us must struggle with these moral questions, but in a particular way, our Conference and individual bishops will continue to engage policy makers on the moral and human dimensions of this conflict. We pray and hope that policy makers begin to work together on a bipartisan basis to bring an end to this war and occupation at the earliest opportunity consistent with the limited goal of a responsible transition and the protection of human lives -- Iraqi and American.