



Department of Social Development and World Peace

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August 24, 2006

Ambassador Susan C. Schwab
United States Trade Representative
The Winder Building
600 17th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20508

Dear Ambassador Schwab:

Let me first offer congratulations on your appointment as United States Trade Representative. Your appointment caps many years of public service that I trust will serve you well in the challenges ahead. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) considers trade a vital tool in combating poverty and hunger around the world and of spreading opportunity and self-reliance among poor countries. Our Committee on International Policy looks forward to continuing this discussion with you as we move forward.

Among the questions you face is the ongoing trade relationship between the United States and Vietnam. As Vietnam finalizes the process of accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO), I want to offer support for the Bilateral Trade Agreement between the United States and Vietnam. The USCCB urges the United States to establish Permanent Normal Trade Relations status with Vietnam. These tandem advances mark a significant milestone on the roadmap to normalization of relations between the United States and Vietnam that began more than a decade ago. U.S. administrations, both Republican and Democratic, have embraced that roadmap, and today it is a significant step closer to fulfillment.

WTO membership means that Vietnam will become part of a rules-based international trading system that brings with it important commitments on economic openness, transparency in political and economic affairs, and adherence to the rule of law. Just as important, this will reinforce a pattern of reform that has been underway in Vietnam for some time.

In testimony before the U.S. Congress, USCCB has encouraged stronger ties between the United States and Vietnam that includes closer trading relationships. The Church in Vietnam, while still suffering restrictions in its pastoral life, has nevertheless reported a continuing improved relationship with the government. While relations between the Catholic Church, the largest Christian body in Vietnam, and the government have improved, we cannot ignore the still harsh treatment suffered by some Evangelical,

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Buddhist, and other groups in the country. Such treatment is a violation of the universal right to religious freedom and unacceptable in a trading partner of the United States.

In light of recent testimony before the U.S. Congress of ongoing limitations on religious freedom in Vietnam, we urge the Administration and lawmakers to use the opportunity of deliberating on granting Permanent Normal Trade Relations to seek both assurances and concrete steps from the Vietnamese government that religious freedom will be fully respected. We trust that closer trade relationships will further greater freedom for all religious bodies in Vietnam and end all restrictions on religious practice.

At the time of the U.S. decision to establish formal relations with Vietnam, the USCCB Committee on International Policy issued the following statement that remains valid today:

The Catholic Bishops of Vietnam have long advocated increased diplomatic, trade and other relations between their country and the United States. We welcome this step, then, not as a sign of approval of a regime that still fails to assure the full rights of its people, but as a means of strengthening the needed dialogue, of making more effective our concern for the people of Vietnam, and of moving forward in healing the wounds of war.

We hope that Vietnam's accession to the WTO, along with normalization of relations with the United States, will give an important boost to the domestic reform process in Vietnam and help that nation become a fully-integrated participant in the international community. It is important that Congress act soon to grant Vietnam Permanent Normal Trade Relations.

With good wishes for your important task in ensuring that our country's trade policies help combat poverty, promote human development and protect human rights, I remain,

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Thomas Wenski". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal line extending to the left of the name.

Most Reverent Thomas G. Wenski
Bishop of Orlando
Chairman, Committee on International Policy