

**CALL FOR DIALOGUE AND ACTION
ON *RESPONSIBLE TRANSITION* IN IRAQ**

**A Statement of the President of the
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops**

**Bishop William S. Skylstad
Bishop of Spokane**

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As the Catholic bishops of the United States gather in Baltimore, our thoughts and prayers are with our military personnel in Iraq, their families, and the suffering people of Iraq. The situation in Iraq is perilous—taking the lives of so many Iraqis, Americans and others, and undermining the dignity of many more. The current situation is taking a terrible toll—on the Iraqi people and our military personnel, as well as on the region, our nation, and the world. The war’s costs are measured in lives lost and many more injured, in widespread sectarian strife, civil insurgency and terrorist attacks, and in the daily struggles of Iraqis to build a decent future for their devastated nation.

At the beginning of this year, Bishop Thomas Wenski, Chairman of our Committee on International Policy, issued a statement entitled *Toward a Responsible Transition in Iraq*. The increases in sectarian violence and civil strife have made the challenge of securing a “responsible transition” in Iraq even more urgent today. The search for genuine justice and peace in Iraq requires moral urgency, substantive dialogue and new directions.

To meet these challenges, we hope our nation has moved beyond the divisive rhetoric of the recent campaign and the shrill and shallow debate that distorts reality and reduces the options to “cut and run” versus “stay the course.” Our nation needs a much more substantive, civil and non-partisan discussion of ways to plan and secure a responsible transition in Iraq. In that spirit,

our Conference offers this statement as a contribution to the genuine dialogue these times demand.

The Administration and the new Congress need to engage in a collaborative dialogue that honestly assesses the situation in Iraq, acknowledges past difficulties and miscalculations, recognizes and builds on positive advances (e.g. broad participation in elections), and reaches agreement on concrete steps to address the serious challenges that lie ahead. This national dialogue should not re-fight past battles, but rather seriously examine alternative courses of action, especially in light of their human, moral and financial costs. We hope the report of the forthcoming Iraq Study Group, chaired by former Secretary James Baker and former Congressman Lee Hamilton, will help bring about the honest dialogue that our nation needs.

The Holy See and our bishops' Conference have repeatedly expressed grave moral concerns about military intervention in Iraq and the unpredictable and uncontrollable negative consequences of invasion and occupation.

The Holy See and our Conference now support broad and necessary international engagement to promote stability and reconstruction in Iraq. Therefore, our nation cannot just look back. The complex situation in Iraq demands that our nation look around at what we face now and look ahead to what we can do in the future. The intervention in Iraq has brought additional moral responsibilities to help Iraqis to secure and rebuild their country. 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.

Basic benchmarks for a responsible transition in Iraq include: fostering adequate levels of security; curbing wanton killings, indefensible terrorist attacks and sectarian violence; strengthening the basic rule of law; promoting economic reconstruction to begin to create employment and economic opportunity for Iraqis; and supporting the further development of political structures and solutions that advance stability, political participation, and respect for religious freedom and basic human rights. Ultimately, this work must be done by Iraqis, but the

United States and its coalition partners have a moral obligation to continue and intensify efforts with Iraqis, other countries in the region and the international community toward achieving these benchmarks. In particular, we urge Arab nations and the countries of Western Europe to take concrete steps against terror and to seek stability in the region. In addition, the future of Iraq and the whole region would be improved by our nation's concerted leadership to resolve, in concert with the international community, other conflicts in the region, especially by pursuing a just peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

Of particular concern is the deadly sectarian violence engulfing the Shia and Sunni communities in Iraq. The resolution of these conflicts also rests ultimately with Iraqis. They must reject violence and focus on political accommodation and just economic and social policies that benefit all segments of Iraqi society. This will demand leadership, compromise and accountability. The U.S. should use its power, influence and presence to advance these ends and to make clear that failure to make progress on them will require a reexamination of our role and presence.

As bishops and as defenders of the human rights and religious freedom of all, we are alarmed by the deteriorating situation of Christians and other religious minorities in Iraq. Their vulnerability is dramatic evidence of the serious and growing dangers facing the entire nation of Iraq. Christians in particular are caught in the middle of civil strife between Sunnis and Shiites. Our prayerful support goes out to our brothers and sisters in the Christian community and to all those threatened by the deadly violence. We are deeply impressed by the courage of many Christians who remain in the land of their birth. Effective efforts are required to end all sectarian violence and to make Iraq secure for persons of all faith communities.

Our bishops' Conference continues to dialogue with U.S. policy makers regarding Iraq. In statements, letters and meetings, we have expressed grave moral concern regarding "preventive war," noted the new moral responsibilities that our nation has in Iraq, worked to protect religious freedom in Iraq, supported firm resolve and effective strategies in the struggle against terrorism, condemned torture and called for efforts to address the abuse of prisoners and detainees, shared the moral elements of a "responsible transition," and sought to contribute to a serious and civil discussion regarding ways forward in Iraq.

We remain concerned for the safety of the men and women who serve generously in the U.S. military. We are grateful for their heroic sacrifices on behalf of the Iraqi people and affirm the extraordinary ministry of military chaplains among them. We are deeply concerned for the lives and dignity of the Iraqi people who are also our sisters and brothers and deserve our care and solidarity.

Our Conference of bishops calls upon all Catholics to pray daily for the safety of those who honorably serve our nation and for their families. We especially offer our support and solidarity to those who have lost loved ones in Iraq. Our prayers and solidarity must also include the Iraqi people, who have suffered so greatly under a brutal dictator and now face continuing violence, instability and deprivation.

At this critical time, our nation needs open and courageous dialogue to examine where things stand in pursuing justice and peace in Iraq, assess what is achievable there, and evaluate the moral and human consequences of alternative courses of action. Let us pray for the wisdom and courage needed to take steps along the difficult path toward a responsible transition that helps Iraqis build a better future. As President of our Conference of bishops, I make this appeal in the spirit of the Beatitudes, which assure us, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Matthew 5:9).