



Committee on International Justice and Peace

3211 FOURTH STREET NE • WASHINGTON DC 20017-1194 • 202-541-3160

WEBSITE: WWW.USCCB.ORG/JPHD • FAX 202-541-3339

March 21, 2016

The Honorable Ed Royce, Chair
Committee on Foreign Affairs
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Eliot L. Engel, Ranking Member
Committee on Foreign Affairs
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representatives Royce and Engel,

In April 2015, I wrote urging you to support and pass H.R. 1150, the Frank Wolf International Religious Freedom Act of 2015. As Chair of the Committee on International Justice and Peace of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), I again urge you to take swift action to pass this important legislation that can help advance international religious freedom and protect those who find themselves persecuted because of their faith.

Violence has rocked so many countries around the world, much of it related to religious persecution by extremists or ethnic/sectarian tensions with religious overtones. The beheadings of Copts in Libya, brutality by ISIS-affiliated groups in Syria and Iraq that has led to a massive outflow of refugees, Muslim-Christian conflicts in the Central African Republic, Boko Haram violence against both Muslims and Christians in Nigeria, bombings of churches and killings based on allegations of blasphemy in Pakistan, kidnappings, rapes and forced conversions of young women and girls, and the persecution of Rohingya in Myanmar are all examples of this tragic trend. Pope Francis, in talking about this phenomenon, said, “In this third world war, waged piecemeal, which we are now experiencing, a form of genocide is taking place, and it must end.” He went on to say, “...there is no religious or human justification for it.”

The Catholic Church views protection of religious freedom as a “cornerstone of the structure of human rights” since it is rooted in the dignity of the human person. USCCB worked with other faith-based groups and members of Congress from both parties to pass the landmark 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA). Given this engagement and the Church’s ongoing concern over the plight of religious minorities, we strongly support H.R. 1150. This legislation updates the 1998 IRFA and provides more tools for the U.S. government to pursue international religious freedom goals. The legislation’s provisions include:

- Increasing coordination across U.S. government agencies to advance international religious freedom policies and religious engagement strategies, and raising the profile of international religious freedom by establishing interagency policy committees within the National Security Council;
- Specifying annual actions to be taken against countries with severe religious freedom violations as well as the authority to sanction individuals and non-state actors who commit such violations; and
- Expanding diplomatic training, counter-terrorism coordination, and foreign assistance efforts to reflect and incorporate religious freedom concerns.

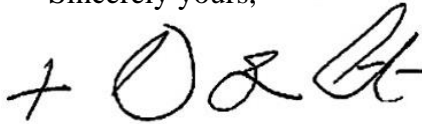
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Passage of H.R. 1150 would be another important step in improving the ability of our nation to advance religious freedom globally. It would reiterate the determination of the United States to promote and protect this most fundamental of human rights. We urge you to lend your support and pass this legislation now.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Oscar Cantú". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "O" and a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Most Reverend Oscar Cantú

Bishop of Las Cruces

Chair, Committee on International Justice and Peace