



Department of Social Development and World Peace

3211 FOURTH STREET NE • WASHINGTON DC 20017-1194 • FAX 202-541-3339
WEBSITE: WWW.USCCB.ORG/SDWP

December 20, 2006

The Honorable Christopher Smith
Chairman
Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights and International Operations
Committee on International Relations
of the United States House of Representatives
Rayburn House Office Building
Room 2170
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Mr. Chairman:

As Chairman of the Committee on International Policy of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, I want to express our gratitude to you for holding a hearing on the 2006 Annual Report on Religious Freedom by the Department of State and offering us an opportunity to share our views for the record. These annual reports document progress, or the lack of it, in achieving religious freedom and serve as visible reminders of the commitment that our nation has made to pursue religious freedom as a central commitment of U.S. foreign policy.

We want to acknowledge and express our appreciation to you for your many years of leadership as Chairman of the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Human Rights and International Operations. You have promoted and championed human rights and religious freedom. Your tireless and dedicated service on behalf of the many victims of human rights abuses throughout the world, regardless of their race, ethnicity, creed or political views, is exemplary. Your work has embodied a vision that builds on the best values of our American tradition.

In particular, we are grateful to you for your commitment to religious freedom. Religious freedom is the first of our freedoms and lies at the heart of human rights from the perspective of Catholic teaching. Faith is oriented to the ultimate concern and purpose of human life. To deny religious freedom is to rob human persons of the ultimate meaning and direction of their lives. Constraining religious liberty diminishes our humanity.

Building an international order on the foundation of fundamental human rights is not simply a moral ideal; it is a practical necessity. As the late Pope John Paul II declared: “[R]espect for human rights [is] the secret of true peace.” A genuine respect for human rights throughout the world would represent “a true milestone on the path of humanity’s moral progress.” Your continuing efforts to reach this milestone are deeply appreciated.

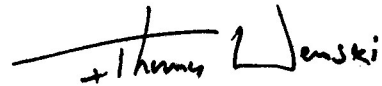
We assure you and your colleagues that the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops will continue vigorously to pursue the cause of religious freedom. We hope that in time all people living in every country of the world, including Saudi Arabia, Iraq, the Holy Land,

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Sudan, China, Vietnam, Burma, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Egypt, Nigeria, Russia, Cuba and other places, will enjoy full religious freedom. Promoting human rights and religious freedom is critical to the Church's life and mission and to the pursuit of international peace. It is also at the heart of our nation's founding principles. My hope is that this important hearing can help advance religious freedom and human rights in important and concrete ways. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, "The defense of religious freedom...is a permanent imperative."

Thank you again for your dedicated leadership, and we look forward to our continuing collaboration with you and the Congress as we seek to promote a world in which human rights and religious freedom are fully respected and observed.

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.

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