

# Bishops to discuss efforts to end war in Iraq with Democrats

WASHINGTON – The U.S. bishops have agreed to meet with a group of Catholic House Democrats to discuss how to pursue the goal of a “responsible transition” to end the war in Iraq.

They also reiterated their call for members of Congress and the Bush administration to break the political stalemate in Washington and “forge bipartisan policies on ways to bring about a responsible transition and an end to the war.”

“The current situation in Iraq is unacceptable and unsustainable,” wrote Bishop Thomas G. Wenski of Orlando, Fla., chairman of the bishops’ Committee on International Policy, in a July 17 letter to Rep. Tim Ryan, D-Ohio. A copy of the letter was released July 18 by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Bishop Wenski’s letter was a response to a June 28 letter Ryan wrote to Bishop Wenski and Bishop William S. Skylstad of Spokane, Wash., USCCB president. Ryan’s letter, sent on behalf of himself and 13 other Catholic House Democrats, urged the bishops to increase their involvement in efforts to end the war in Iraq.

In the July 17 letter, Bishop Wenski said the bishops “share your deep concern for the dangerous and deteriorating situation in Iraq,” and would welcome the opportunity “to meet with you and other policymakers to discuss ways to pursue the goal of a ‘responsible transition’ to bring an end to the war.”

“Too many Iraqi and American lives have been lost,” he wrote. “Too many Iraqi communities have been shattered. Too many civilians have been driven from their homes.”

He also added that the “human and financial costs of the war are staggering” and that church and government officials should use their “shared moral tradition” to guide their dialogue with other leaders in seeking a way to “bring about a morally responsible end to the war.”

The bishop noted that, prior to the war in Iraq, when “too few members of either party in Congress opposed authorizing the use of force,” the U.S. bishops, along with Pope John Paul II, “repeatedly raised grave moral questions about military intervention in Iraq and the unpredictable and uncontrollable negative consequences of an invasion and occupation.”

“Sadly,” he added, “many of the tragic consequences we and others have feared have come to pass.”

In his letter, Bishop Wenski also pointed out that the bishops’ conference had hoped that the report of the bipartisan Iraq Study Group would “lead to candid assessments and honest dialogue that our nation needs to find a responsible way to end U.S. military engagement in Iraq.”

He also said the bishops have expressed concerns for the Iraqi population and in particular for Christians and other minority groups who have suffered in the aftermath of military action in Iraq.

“Our conference is under no illusions regarding Iraq,” he added. “None of the alternative courses of action are without consequences for human life and dignity. There is no path ahead that leads to an unambiguously good outcome for Iraq, our nation and the world.”

But he added that the United States must “have the moral courage to change course in Iraq and to break the policy and political stalemate in Washington so that we can walk a difficult path that does the most good and the least damage in human and moral terms.”

Stephen M. Colecchi, director of the U.S. bishops’ Office of International Justice and Peace, said Bishop Wenski’s response was part of an “ongoing effort to work with members of both parties” in looking for a bipartisan approach for a transition to end the war.

In a July 19 e-mail to Catholic News Service, he said the bishops’ international policy committee has been “encouraging the administration and members of both parties in Congress to forge a bipartisan consensus to address the situation in Iraq for some time.” He added that in a letter to House Minority Leader John Boehner, R-Ohio, the committee also has sought a similar meeting with House Republicans.

Ryan’s June 28 request for a meeting with the bishops sought their help to “mobilize Catholic opinion” on “one of the most critical issues of our time.”

“We have taken great comfort in the prophetic words of many Catholic leaders, relied on them for inspiration during our deliberations and welcomed them in helping shape policy,” he wrote.

Ryan said that he and the other House members requesting the meeting understand that “peace cannot simply exist as an idea” but that efforts must be “accompanied by actions as we embrace teachings of peace and justice.”

“Throughout our nation’s history Catholics have been at the forefront of the fight for social justice. Now, at another critical moment, we respectfully urge the USCCB to join with us in mobilizing for Congress’s efforts to end the war,” he wrote.

Besides Ryan, signers of the letter included Reps. Rosa DeLauro, Connecticut; Jim Moran, Virginia; Jose Serrano, New York; James McGovern, Massachusetts; William Lacy Clay, Missouri; Bart Stupak, Michigan; Anna Eshoo, Hilda Solis, Joe Baca and Grace Napolitano, California; and Marcy Kaptur, Dennis Kucinich and Charlie Wilson, Ohio.