



Toward a Responsible Transition in Iraq

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The Challenge in Iraq

As we begin a new year and almost three years after the initiation of war, the situation in Iraq remains complex, uncertain, and dangerous—for the Iraqi people, for the region, for our nation, and for our military personnel. The war's toll is measured in lives lost and many more injured, in persistent violence and insurgency, and in the daily struggles of Iraqis to build a future for their torn nation. Our Conference of bishops mourns the deaths of more than 2,100 of our nation's sons and daughters and of tens of thousands of Iraqis. We share the pain of the countless numbers of persons who have been injured and maimed and of those whose lives will never be the same. There have been achievements. A dictator has been deposed and elections have been held, but the human and social costs of these achievements must be recognized.

There is no simple or easy way forward. Stability remains elusive and rebuilding efforts are uneven, inadequate and frequently undermined by the lack of security. Our Conference is encouraged by the courage and determination of so many Iraqis who voted in the recent parliamentary elections. We hope these elections will be an important step forward, but everyone acknowledges that the elections represent just one step along a long road.

As bishops and pastors, we seek to offer some moral reflections to help guide our nation along the difficult road ahead. While we recognize that people of goodwill may disagree with specific prudential judgments that we offer, our religious tradition calls us to shine the light of faith and the Church's social teaching on the moral dimensions of the future choices that lie ahead. We hope our reflections will contribute to a serious and civil national dialogue to help our nation chart a way forward that responds to both the moral and human dimensions of the situation in Iraq.

The Challenge to Dialogue

Our bishops' Conference regrets that discussions regarding Iraq have too often led to unproductive debates that are marked by polarization and political posturing on many sides. It is important for all to recognize that addressing questions regarding the decisions that led us to war, and about the conduct of the war and its aftermath, is both necessary and patriotic. It is equally important that these questions be discussed with civility so that necessary reflection and careful deliberation are not lost in a barrage of attacks and counterattacks. Instead our nation needs serious and civil discussions of alternatives that emphasize planning for a *responsible transition* in Iraq. Our Conference hopes that this statement can help contribute to such dialogue.

Since so much is at stake for Iraq, for our nation, for the region and for our world, our nation cannot allow justifications of past positions and partisan attacks on others to replace real, sustained, serious and civil debate. Dialogue is not advanced by challenging the motives or integrity of others or by over-simplifying the challenges we face.

Today some see virtually no progress in Iraq and argue for rapid strategic withdrawal. Others see enormous progress and call for continued and steady engagement. Our Conference rejects any assessment of the reality that is either too pessimistic or too optimistic. Our nation cannot afford a shrill and shallow debate that distorts reality and reduces the options to "cut and run" versus "stay the course." Instead we need a forthright discussion that begins with an honest assessment of the situation in Iraq and acknowledges both the mistakes that have been made and the signs of hope that have appeared. Most importantly, an honest assessment of our moral responsibilities toward Iraq should commit our nation to a policy of *responsible transition*.

The Moral Challenge

It is well known that our bishops' Conference repeatedly expressed grave moral concerns about the military intervention in Iraq and the unpredictable and uncontrollable negative consequences of an invasion and occupation. Similar concerns were articulated powerfully by Pope John Paul II and the Holy See. The events of the past three years, the absence of evidence of weapons of mass destructions and the continuing violence and unrest in Iraq have reinforced those ethical concerns. In light of the moral criteria of the just war tradition, our Conference remains highly skeptical of the concept of "preventive war." As the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* states: "[E]ngaging in a preventive war without clear proof that an attack is imminent cannot fail to raise serious moral and juridical questions."¹

At the same time our nation cannot just look back. We must now look around and look ahead. The intervention in Iraq has brought with it a new set of moral responsibilities to help Iraqis secure and rebuild their country and to address the consequences of the war for the region and the world. The central moral question is not just the timing of U.S. withdrawal, but rather the nature and extent of U.S. and international engagement that allows for a *responsible transition* to security and stability for the Iraqi people. As the late Pope John Paul II said in the wake of the Iraq war:

The many attempts made by the Holy See to avoid the grievous war in Iraq are already known. Today what matters is that the international community

help put the Iraqis, freed from an oppressive regime, in a condition to be able to take up their Country's reins again, consolidate its sovereignty and determine democratically a political and economic system that reflects their aspirations, so that Iraq may once again be a credible partner in the International Community.²

The Challenge of a Responsible Transition

Our nation's military forces should remain in Iraq only as long as it takes for a responsible transition, leaving sooner rather than later. We welcome recent news reports that suggest that troop levels will be reduced as Iraqis assume more responsibility for their own security. But it is important for the United States to send even clearer signals that the goals of U.S. policy are to help Iraqis assume full control of their governance and not to occupy the nation for an indeterminate period. As one example, our government should declare that the presence of U.S. military personnel and bases in Iraq must be an Iraqi decision that respects the needs and sovereignty of the Iraqi people.

Despite past missteps and current difficulties, our nation urgently needs to seek to broaden international support and participation in the stabilization and reconstruction of Iraq. This task will be difficult; but it is still necessary. Securing wider and deeper international support will strengthen the legitimacy and effectiveness of our nation's efforts, but it will also require giving international partners and allies a real voice and real responsibilities. Transferring some responsibility and operational control of the stabilization and reconstruction process to a more accepted international entity, working in partnership with Iraqis, will require that the United States both provide continued financial and military support and also yield some control to others.

As Pope John Paul II said to President Bush in 2004:

It is the evident desire of everyone that this situation now be normalized as quickly as possible with the *active participation of the international community* and, in particular, the United Nations Organization, in order to ensure a speedy return of Iraq's sovereignty, in conditions of security for all its people.³

A *responsible transition* in Iraq means establishing a series of basic benchmarks, including:

- achieving adequate levels of security;
- establishing the rule of law;
- promoting economic reconstruction to help create reasonable levels of employment and economic opportunity; and
- supporting the development of political structures to advance stability, political participation, and respect for religious freedom and basic human rights.

In Catholic social teaching, peace is more than the absence of war; it is built on the foundation of justice. Peace involves the defense of human rights, the pursuit of integral human development and the promotion of the common good.⁴ Our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI recently wrote:

Peace thus comes to be seen in a new light: not as the mere absence of war, but as a harmonious coexistence of individual citizens within a society governed by justice, one in which the good is also achieved, to the extent possible, for each of them.⁵

The Catholic Church has significant and growing experience in fostering post-conflict peacebuilding and reconciliation in various regions of the world, including in The Philippines, South Africa, Burundi, Mozambique, Guatemala, the Balkans and elsewhere. Church leaders and institutions have assisted many peoples as they walked the painstaking, but necessary, path to peace after war and violence. The experience of the Church and others can help inform the challenging work of building peace in the wake of war in Iraq.

Particular Challenges for a Responsible Transition

Our bishops' Conference believes that our nation and the Iraqi people face a number of particular challenges that arise from the complex, uncertain and dangerous situation in Iraq. These challenges include:

- terrorism and our response to it;
- the violation of the human rights of persons in the custody of U.S. and Iraqi forces;
- threats to religious liberty and religious minorities in Iraq;
- the plight of refugees; and
- meeting other responsibilities of our nation.

Violence and Terrorism: Our Conference unequivocally condemns all terrorist attacks, especially those that target civilians. We echo the teaching of our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI: "Nowadays, the truth of peace continues to be dramatically compromised and rejected by terrorism, whose criminal threats and attacks leave the world in a state of fear and insecurity."⁶ The use of force is never just when it fails to discriminate between combatants and non-combatants in a conflict.

At the same time our Conference reiterates that terrorism cannot be fought solely, or even principally, with military methods. As the USCCB Administrative Committee has warned in 2002:

This "war on terrorism" should be fought with the support of the international community and primarily by non-military means, denying terrorists resources, recruits, and opportunities for their evil acts. ... As we

confront evil acts, which no cause can justify, this "war on terrorism" must not deflect us from sustained commitment to overcome poverty, conflict and injustice, particularly in the Middle East and the developing world, which can provide fertile ground in which hopelessness and terrorism thrive.⁷

In the frustrating and dangerous task of confronting terrorists, now drawn to and active in Iraq, our nation must guard against overly aggressive and unwise military responses that endanger civilians and thereby undermine the winning of hearts and minds that is critical to the long term struggle with terrorists and insurgents. Our moral tradition insists that the use of military force must be proportional and discriminate. When tactical military responses are required, we must never forget that the wider struggle with terrorism, together with our basic moral commitments and legal obligations, demand respect for human rights.

We must heed the warning of Pope John Paul II in his 2002 World Day of Peace Message:

International cooperation in the fight against terrorist activities must also include a courageous and resolute political, diplomatic and economic commitment to relieving situations of oppression and marginalization which facilitate the designs of terrorists. The recruitment of terrorists in fact is easier in situations where rights are trampled upon and injustices tolerated over a long period of time.⁸

It is important to distinguish between the tactic of terrorist attacks that are never justifiable and the political concerns which feed the insurgency. In order to reduce popular support for the insurgency, it is critically important to help create viable political space for Sunni and minority participation in Iraq.

Human Rights: In light of deeply disturbing and continuing reports of persistent violations of the human rights of persons in the custody of U.S. military, and more recently of reports of similar abuses by the newly reconstituted Iraqi forces, our bishops' Conference once again urges immediate steps be taken to end these violations, to prevent future occurrences and to discover how they came about. The abuse and torture of detainees violate human rights. They simultaneously undermine both the struggle against terrorism and the prospects of a responsible transition in Iraq. Such abuse undercuts our nation's moral credibility and damages our nation's ability to win popular support in other countries where backing is needed for the struggles in Iraq and against global terrorism. Defending the basic human rights of detainees can also strengthen our insistence on the humane treatment of our own military personnel who become captives.

Our nation simply must live up to our own Constitution's prohibition against cruel and unusual punishment, and adhere to the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment of 1984. As a world leader, our nation's adherence to international standards ought to be exemplary. For these reasons our Conference has supported

Congressional efforts to prohibit cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment of persons and to provide uniform standards for the interrogation of persons under detention by the Department of Defense. Our Conference also supports a proposal to appoint a special human rights officer to the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad.

Recently Pope Benedict XVI affirmed the importance of international humanitarian law and called on all countries to obey its requirements. In his 2006 Peace Message the Holy Father declared:

The truth of peace must also let its beneficial light shine even amid the tragedy of war. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, in the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, pointed out that “not everything automatically becomes permissible between hostile parties once war has regrettably commenced.” As a means of limiting the devastating consequences of war as much as possible, especially for civilians, the international community has created an international humanitarian law. In a variety of situations and in different settings, the Holy See has expressed its support for this humanitarian law, and has called for it to be respected and promptly implemented, out of the conviction that the truth of peace exists even in the midst of war.⁹

Religious Liberty: Our Conference has repeatedly called for the protection of religious liberty in Iraq and renews that call once again. The Catholic bishops in Iraq have expressed serious concerns regarding conflicting provisions in the proposed constitution of Iraq and are wary of its implementation. In light of these concerns, our Conference urges the active support of the U.S. to encourage clearer protection of religious freedom in both law and practice.

Religious freedom includes many rights; it cannot be limited to the freedom to practice religious rites or the freedom to worship. Religious liberty must include the right to practice religious beliefs alone or with others, in private or in public; to acquire and hold property; to educate children in their faith; and to establish religious institutions, such as schools, hospitals and charitable agencies. Religious freedom is also directly related to other freedoms, such as the freedom of speech and the freedom of association, so that people of faith can freely share ideas and act together in the public square. A truly democratic Iraq must continue to accommodate its religious, especially Christian, minorities.

Refugees: The war and ongoing instability in Iraq have resulted in a significant flow of refugees from Iraq, especially among Christians and other religious minorities who suffer attacks and discrimination. Chaldean Patriarch Emmanuel-Karim Delly of Baghdad has pleaded with Western governments to protect Iraqi refugees. He noted that although he hoped that people would stay in Iraq, he understood that people fled when “children get kidnapped or killed, when there's no security, no peace.”¹⁰ Our Conference urges the United States and the international community to provide greater support and attention to the plight of Iraqi refugees and asylum seekers. We continue to believe that U.S. policy toward Iraqi refugees and asylum seekers is too restrictive.

Our Conference calls upon the U.S. to protect Iraqi refugees and asylum seekers, including the Christian and other religious minorities fleeing Iraq. In particular, we call on the government to (1) designate Iraqi religious minorities as a group of special concern for the purposes of determining refugee resettlement eligibility, (2) eliminate current restrictions on family reunification eligibility in the refugee admissions program, (3) provide for expeditious, emergent refugee processing directly from Iraq for cases of particular vulnerability, and (4) carefully consider Iraqi asylum seekers' claims, especially religious minorities and other vulnerable individuals, and not reject their asylum requests on the presumption that conditions allow for a safe return to Iraq.

Other U.S. Responsibilities: The very costly conflict in Iraq demands a major commitment of human and financial resources, but Iraq cannot become an excuse for ignoring other pressing needs at home and abroad, especially our moral responsibilities toward the poor in our own nation and in developing countries. Our Conference reiterates the need to protect the poor at home and abroad in setting our national priorities. As we noted in our Conference's February 2005 letter to Congress:

As pastors, we believe that a fundamental moral measure of our nation's budget policy is whether it enhances or undermines the lives and dignity of those most in need. Sadly, political pressure frequently has left poor children and families missing in the national debate and without a place at the table. Our nation needs a genuinely bipartisan commitment to focus on the common good of all and on the special needs of the poor and vulnerable in particular. These are tough times. There are few easy choices. But there are some "right" choices. In a time of war, mounting deficits, and growing needs, our nation's leaders must ensure that there are adequate resources to protect people who are poor and vulnerable both at home and around the world.¹¹

Pastoral Concern for U.S. Military Personnel

As bishops, we wish to speak special words of care and concern to the members of our military and their families who find themselves in the midst of this terrible conflict. We also affirm the extraordinarily important work of military chaplains. They serve in the name of the Church in a vital pastoral service. Pope Benedict XVI recently recalled the teaching of the Second Vatican Council that "those who enter the military in service to their country should look upon themselves as guardians of the security and freedom" and as contributors to "the establishment of peace." He went on to "encourage both the military Ordinaries and military chaplains to be, in every situation and context, faithful heralds of the truth of peace."¹²

Our Conference wants to be clear. Raising grave moral questions regarding the decision to invade Iraq is not to question the moral integrity of those serving in the military. Expressing moral questions regarding the treatment of U.S. prisoners and detainees is not to question the professional integrity of the vast majority of those on deployment. In fact, asking difficult questions is a patriotic and moral duty that reflects our values and serves the best interests of our nation and those who serve it with

honor.

Caution and Hope

Our Conference has been in continuing dialogue with U.S. policy makers regarding Iraq. We have expressed grave moral concern regarding “preventive war,” noted the new moral responsibilities that our nation has assumed in Iraq, worked to protect religious freedom in Iraq, supported 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 the way forward in Iraq.¹³ We know that statements are not enough. The time has come for public reflection that leads to action.

Our nation is at a crossroads in Iraq. We must avoid two directions that distort reality and limit appropriate responses. We must resist a pessimism that might move our nation to abandon the moral responsibilities it accepted in using force and might tempt us to withdraw prematurely from Iraq without regard for moral and human consequences. We must reject an optimism that fails to acknowledge clearly past mistakes, failed intelligence, and inadequate planning related to Iraq, and minimizes the serious challenges and human costs that lie ahead.

Instead our nation must act with a constructive and informed realism that helps us to learn from the past and to move forward. Our policy makers and citizens must be willing to ask difficult moral questions regarding preventive war and to learn from our experience in Iraq. More immediately, our nation must engage in serious and civil dialogue in order to walk a difficult path toward a *responsible transition* that seeks to help Iraqis take responsibility for building a better future for themselves—a future that contributes to peace in the region and beyond. This national dialogue must begin with a search for the “truth” of where we find ourselves in Iraq and not with a search for political advantage or justifications for past positions.

By embracing the honesty that it takes for genuine dialogue that seeks a path to a just peace in Iraq, our nation would be striving to find “in truth, peace.” Our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, reflected on this theme in his 2006 World Day of Peace Message. “In truth, peace” is a theme that “expresses the conviction that wherever and whenever men and women are enlightened by the splendor of truth, they naturally set out on the path of peace.”¹⁴

Notes

1. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2004), no. 501.
2. Pope John Paul II, *Address to the Diplomatic Corps*, January 12, 2004.
3. Pope John Paul II, *Address to President Bush*, June 4, 2004.
4. See the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, nos. 494-495.
5. Pope Benedict XVI, *World Day of Peace Message* (January 1, 2006), no. 6.

6. Pope Benedict XVI, *World Day of Peace Message* (January 1, 2006), no. 9.
7. Administrative Committee, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Statement on the Anniversary of September 11th*, September 10, 2002
8. John Paul II, 2002 World Day of Peace Message (January 1, 2002), no. 5.
9. Pope Benedict XVI, *World Day of Peace Message* (January 1, 2006), no. 7.
10. Catholic News Service, "Chaldean patriarch says nations should not turn away fleeing Iraqis," October 17, 2005.
11. Bishop William S. Skylstad, Letter to Congress on FY 2006 Budget Priorities, February 15, 2005.
12. Pope Benedict XVI, World Day of Peace Message (January 1, 2006), no. 8.
13. One example is the "Colloquium Ethics of War after 9/11 and Iraq" that was held on November 11, 2005 at Georgetown University. This Colloquium was cosponsored by the Committee on International Policy of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in conjunction with the Joan B. Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame and the Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, the Mortara Center for International Studies, and the Initiative on Religion, Politics and Peace at Georgetown University.
14. Pope Benedict XVI, World Day of Peace Message (January 1, 2006), no. 3.

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