

Catholic bishops urge U.S. troop departure from Iraq 'sooner' War draining funds from other pressing needs: War draining funds from other pressing needs

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America's Catholic bishops have called for the U.S. military to leave Iraq "sooner rather than later," and expressed concern that the war has drained funds from "pressing needs" at home and abroad.

Bishop Thomas Wenski, writing for the bishops' international policy committee, called for an "honest assessment" of the Iraqi situation that avoids simplistic answers or partisan finger-pointing. "Our nation cannot afford a shrill and shallow debate that distorts reality and reduces the options to 'cut and run' versus 'stay the course,'" said Wenski, the bishop of Orlando, Florida.

The bishop's eight-page statement said the church—historically an influential voice on matters of war and peace—wants to help guide the nation in a "forthright" discussion that will lead to a "responsible transition" in Iraq.

The statement comes amid attempts by the White House to issue more candid assessments about Iraq, talk of reduced troop levels, congressional probes into allegations of torture and international discussions about Iraq's political future.

Other churches have also tried to spark debate over Iraq's future. Last November, the bishops of President Bush's own denomination, the United Methodist Church, called for an "immediate" plan to withdraw troops.

Both the Catholic and the United Methodist bishops staunchly opposed the war in 2003, saying it failed to meet just war criteria. Bush refused to meet with Methodist

leaders, but did reluctantly receive a Vatican cardinal.

Bill Ryan, a spokesman for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said church leaders “felt the urge, the desire, the need to say something” as the U.S. faces what Wenski called a “crossroads” in Iraq.

Wenski said the time for partisan battles over mistakes in the war or failed intelligence is over. “We must now look around and look ahead,” he wrote. However, he also warned against “oversimplifying the challenges we face,” both in securing the peace and in stabilizing Iraq’s political future in “the painstaking, but necessary, path to peace after war and violence.”

Those challenges include investigating allegations of and ending torture, securing rights for religious minorities in Iraq, loosening restrictions on Iraqi refugees and continuing to address problems—particularly poverty—at home, Wenski said.

Jean Stokan, policy director for the Catholic peace group Pax Christi USA, praised the bishops for trying to reengage the church in the debate over Iraq’s future and for trying to prevent future preemptive wars.

“The religious sector is direly needed at this time to speak to this moment with clarity . . . in recapturing the values of the common good,” Stokan said. *-Religion News Service*