Moral Questions Regarding Iraq in an Election Year
By Stephen M. Colecchi

The war in Iraq remains a major issue for voters in this election year. For U.S. Catholic bishops, however, Iraq is not primarily a partisan or political matter. For them, the war is a moral and human concern.

In late 2007, the bishops offered pre-election moral guidance on Iraq and a range of important issues facing our nation in their statement, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*.

They stated: "The war in Iraq confronts us with urgent moral choices. We support a 'responsible transition' that ends the war in a way that recognizes the continuing threat of fanatical extremism and global terror, minimizes the loss of life, and addresses the humanitarian crisis in Iraq, the refugee crisis in the region, and the need to protect human rights, especially religious freedom. This transition should reallocate resources from war to the urgent needs of the poor."

This statement marks the most recent of several that the bishops have issued reflecting their consideration of Iraq. In a letter and three statements issued prior to the war, the Conference of Bishops repeatedly "raised serious moral questions" regarding the possibility of war and expressed concerns for the "unpredictable and uncontrollable negative consequences of invasion and occupation."

Pope Benedict XVI and the bishops have questioned whether the resort to war could meet the strict conditions in Catholic teaching on the use of military force. In particular they questioned the moral legitimacy of "preventive war" to counter gathering threats. As the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* teaches: "[E]ngaging in a preventive war without clear proof that an attack is imminent cannot fail to raise serious moral and juridical questions." (#501)

We should continue to learn from the decisions that were made prior to the war. However, now that our forces are in Iraq we face new moral questions and responsibilities toward the Iraqi people.

The bishops use the term "responsible transition" as a shorthand way to refer to a moral framework regarding the war. This framework is rooted in the Church's commitment to protect the life and dignity of the human person. The word "responsible" refers to our obligations to

minimize loss of life and to address the urgent humanitarian needs of the Iraqi people. The word "transition" reminds us that our nation should withdraw its troops as soon as possible.

Achieving a responsible transition will not be easy. The surge in U.S. troop levels has reduced large scale military conflicts and created openness for political reconciliation in Iraq. However, smaller, decentralized acts of violence remain widespread. Out of a total population of about 27 million, more than two million Iraqis are internally displaced from their homes and another two million are refugees who have fled the country. A disproportionate number of displaced families and refugees are Christians and other religious minorities.

For more than two and a half years, the bishops have called for bipartisan cooperation to break the political stalemate in Washington. They have urged leaders of both parties to find ways to promote a "responsible transition" that minimizes further loss of human life and addresses the humanitarian crisis in Iraq and the region-wide refugee crisis. An effective plan will promote political reconciliation and engage international support, including that of Syria and Iran, to stabilize Iraq.

The bishops are acutely aware of the sacrifices of military personnel. In addition to our responsibilities toward Iraqis, our country has moral obligations to provide for the human, medical, mental health and social needs of military personnel and their families.

The bishops' moral framework does not provide a detailed roadmap out of Iraq, but it does suggest important moral questions for Catholic voters to ponder. For example, in light of the traditional moral principle of "probability of success," we should ask: Is it likely that a given course of action will contribute to a "responsible transition" and withdrawal as soon as possible? Will it save lives, promote reconciliation, protect religious freedom and help stabilize Iraq?

The bishops' moral analysis has some practical relevance. The bipartisan Iraq Study Group explicitly promoted "responsible transition." Some members of Congress have attempted to craft bipartisan approaches.

Perhaps if enough voters ask the right moral questions, a new Iraq policy might engender broad bipartisan support. It could even help our next President unite our nation on a path to peace.

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