

Testimony by Bishop Ricardo Ramirez, CSB
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on behalf of the
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

before the Foreign Affairs Committee
of the United States House of Representatives

Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health and Human Rights
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Mr. Chairman and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops to offer testimony today on a high priority for our Conference, the protection of international religious freedom. We appreciate the leadership you have shown, Mr. Chairman, in calling this hearing to emphasize the importance of religious freedom and the need to make it a more integral element of U.S. foreign policy. I am Ricardo Ramirez, the Bishop of Las Cruces. I currently serve on the Committee on International Justice and Peace of the U.S. Bishops' Conference. I will summarize our testimony and ask that the full written testimony be entered into the record.

I had the honor and responsibility of serving on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom from 2003 to 2007. Three other Catholic bishops, Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, Archbishop Charles Chaput, and Bishop William Murphy have served on the Commission since it was established in 1999. It was an enlightening and enriching experience. I traveled to China, Egypt, South Africa, Sudan and Uzbekistan with other Commissioners to meet with people of different religious traditions and examine the conditions in which they were allowed to practice their religion.

While membership on the Commission expanded my knowledge of the challenges facing religious people around the world, the global presence of the Catholic Church and the work of local, national and international Catholic organizations throughout the world, has enabled members of our Conference of Bishops to make particular contributions to both the Commission's and our nation's understanding of how religious freedom serves society and advances development and democracy.

I have been asked to comment on the state of religious freedom around the world as well as suggest ways Congress and the Administration might work to improve international religious freedom. But first let me outline the Catholic Church's understanding of Religious Freedom.

Catholic Church's Perspective on Religious Freedom

The Catholic Church has long championed religious freedom throughout the world. In 1965 the Second Vatican Council declared that "the human person has a right to religious freedom,"¹ and

¹ Flannery, Austin, ed. Vatican Council II: the Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents (new rev. ed.), Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1992, Declaration on Religious Liberty, 7 December 1965, No. 2.

called upon governments to “assume the safeguard of the religious freedom of all [their] citizens, in an effective manner, by just laws and by other appropriate means.”² According to the Catholic teaching, religious freedom, rooted in the dignity of the human person, is “a cornerstone of the structure of human rights,”³ and is closely tied to freedoms of speech, association and assembly.

At a time of alarming incidents of religious intolerance and even persecution, Pope Benedict XVI focused his January 1, 2011 World Day of Peace message on “Religious Freedom: The Path to Peace.” In that message, he states, “When religious freedom is acknowledged, the dignity of the human person is respected at its root, and the *ethos* and institutions of people are strengthened.”

Religious freedom has both a personal and a social dimension because human beings are by their very nature social. Pope Benedict notes, “Religious freedom expresses what is unique about the human person, for it allows us to direct our personal and social life to God...to eclipse the public role of religion is to create a society which is unjust, inasmuch as it fails to take account of the true nature of the human person; *it is to stifle the growth of the authentic and lasting peace of the whole human family.*”⁴

When the Church speaks about religious freedom, it is not arguing solely for freedom from coercion in matters of personal faith and conscience; it is also advocating for freedom to practice the faith individually and communally, in both private and public. Freedom of religion extends beyond freedom of worship to include the institutional freedom of the Church and religious organizations to provide education, health and other social services, to propagate their faith through the media, and to allow religiously-motivated individuals and communities to participate in public policy debates and contribute to society and the common good.

Religious Freedom Under Attack

Unfortunately, recent events tragically show that religious freedom is under attack in many countries around the world. A Pew study showed that Christians, more than any other religious group, face some form of either governmental or societal harassment in 133 countries.⁵ There are many examples of the ongoing hardship and violence that people suffer for their belief every day: the police crackdown on the faithful who simply want a place to pray and worship in China, the burning of churches and attacks by extremists against Copts in Egypt, and the persecution of Christians in Eritrea, Baha’is in Iran, Ahmaddis in Indonesia, and Muslims in Uzbekistan who reject state government control over religious practice.

The January and March 2011 assassinations in Pakistan of Punjab Governor Salman Taseer (a Muslim) and of Minister for Minority Affairs Shahbaz Bhatti (a Catholic and the only Christian member of the Cabinet) for their support for amending blasphemy laws; the New Year’s Day bombing of a Coptic Church in Egypt; the Christmas eve bombings of Christian churches in Nigeria; and the October 2010 attack on worshippers at a Syrian Catholic Church in Baghdad are

² Flannery, No. 6.

³ Pope John Paul II, World Day of Peace message, 1 January 1988.

⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, World Day of Peace message, 1 January 2011, no. 1.

⁵ Dr. Brian Grim, “Religious Persecution and Discrimination against Christians and Members of Other Religions,” paper presented to European Parliament, October 5, 2010.

just a few of the more horrific reminders of how people are paying with their lives for what they believe.

A December 2009 Pew study on “Global Restrictions on Religion” found that 64 nations, with 70 percent of the world’s population, have high or very high governmental or societal restrictions on religion.⁶ Recent examples of government restrictions include: controlling religious groups through registration, fines and harassment; prohibiting conversions; restricting foreign missionaries; and favoring one religious group over others. Social hostilities, defined as “concrete, hostile actions that effectively hinder the religious activities of the targeted individuals or groups,” may include harassment over attire, practices or occupations which run counter to those of the majority; vandalism of religious property or homes of religious minorities; and beatings and murders. What is more discouraging is that even though many nations have freedom of religion provisions in their constitutions, the Pew study found that only 27 percent fully respected religious rights.

An August 2011 follow-up Pew study found that restrictions on religion rose between 2006 and 2009 in some of the most populous countries, affecting about a third of the world’s population. The study points to China, Egypt, France, Nigeria, Russia, Thailand, Vietnam and the United Kingdom as eight countries where governmental or social restrictions increased substantially while religious restrictions in countries such as India, Pakistan, Indonesia, Iran, Bangladesh, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia and Myanmar remained very high.⁷

These statistics make clear that more must be done to protect religious freedom. It is not just Christians who are under attack, but Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus and others who often comprise a minority group within a given religion or society. For example, the Pew study shows that Muslims, who constitutes about a quarter of the world’s population, face governmental or societal harassment in about 115 countries.⁸

The Church recognizes the pluralism of religious belief and encourages tolerance, and beyond tolerance, respect, for those of differing religious traditions. It behooves leaders of all religions to work together to build a global culture of respect for religious freedom as a guarantor of human dignity and a contributor to justice.

For our nation to have credibility in addressing religious freedom globally, we must continually work to protect religious freedom at home in the United States. Cardinal Theodore McCarrick testified before the Senate Judiciary Committee on March 29, 2011 in a hearing on the protection of civil rights and religious freedom. While the focus on his talk was on combating religious bigotry, bias and prejudice within the United States, he also pointed to threats to the identity and integrity of Catholic social institutions as well as those of other religious traditions, if faith-based institutions are not allowed to offer services in keeping with their religious tenets. He noted that it is necessary to have “conscience clauses” in legislation for this purpose. He said, “...when the state narrowly defines in legislation which religious institutions are ‘religious enough’ to enjoy religious freedom protections, or when the state imposes restrictions on how religious institutions

⁶ Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, “Global Restrictions on Religion,” December 2009

⁷ Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, “Rising Restrictions on Religion,” August 2011

⁸ Dr. Brian Grim, paper presented to European Parliament.

and individuals are able to serve those in need, the ability to exercise religious freedom in an effective and authentic manner is greatly undermined.”

The status of religious liberty in our own nation prompted our Conference of Bishops to establish an Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty two months ago. Bishop William Lori, the chairman of that Committee testified to the Subcommittee on the Constitution of the House Judiciary Committee on October 26, 2011. In his testimony, he noted, “In the recent past, the Bishops of the United States have watched with increasing alarm as this great national legacy of religious liberty, so profoundly in harmony with our own teachings, has been subject to ever more frequent assault and ever more rapid erosion.” These developments have the potential to undermine our nation’s credibility as a promoter of international religious freedom.

Reflections on Department of State Annual Religious Freedom Report

Our Conference of Bishops commends the Department of State for its preparation of the annual International Religious Freedom Reports, as mandated by the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) of 1998. We recognize the work and efforts of hundreds of foreign service officers and local embassy staff in gathering information from a variety of sources, sometimes under rather hazardous conditions. This report evaluates the state of religious freedom around the world. While the 2010 report on religious freedom in 198 countries appears to be fairly thorough, let me offer some comments on a few countries on which our Bishops’ Conference has focused particular concern in recent years. These remarks are by no means comprehensive.

Pakistan: The violence against religious minorities in Pakistan is of deep concern. USCCB staff met on several occasions with Shahbaz Bhatti, Minister for Minority Affairs, who was assassinated on March 2, 2011 in broad daylight. His death followed the early January 2011 assassination of Punjab Governor Salman Taseer, a Muslim, by his own security guard. Both were allegedly targeted because of their support for changes in their country’s blasphemy laws. These laws are often used to justify attacks against religious minorities, especially Christians. Their brutal deaths and the “hero” status accorded to their assassins indicate a degree of impunity with which religiously-motivated perpetrators are allowed to operate and reflect a worrisome increase in violence. Over the years, as we have been alerted to attacks perpetrated against Christians in Pakistan, USCCB has written letters to the Secretary of State asking that the U.S. government press the Pakistani government to better protect the human rights of all its citizens, especially Christians and other vulnerable minorities. Our Conference asks the Department of State to consider whether the religiously motivated assassinations of Punjab Governor Taseer and Minister Bhatti warrant designating Pakistan as a Country of Particular Concern (CPC) next year.

India: The State Department report does document a number of abuses of religious freedom; however, given the size and complexity of the country and the limits on federal power, there are undoubtedly other instances that have not been registered due to lack of cooperation between national and local authorities. Staff of our Conference of Bishops visited India in March 2010 to look into attacks on Christians in the state of Orissa during the period August to October 2008. While the report does refer to the incident and notes that Christian groups in one Orissa town complained of police harassment “at the instigation of Hindu extremist groups,” there is no mention of the ongoing suffering experienced by Christian villagers whose homes and

livelihoods were destroyed in the 2008 riots. Over 60 people were killed, thousands injured and 50,000 displaced at the time. The report mentions that the Orissa state government has “subsequently ensured law and order in Kandhamal district by promoting reconciliation, rehabilitation and justice and ensuring a visible administrative, policy and civil society presence.” Our staff observations on the ground indicate that this may be too optimistic an assessment. Many Christians are still living in limbo, fearful of returning to their original villages, waiting for justice. The section on forced conversions in the State Department report makes scant mention of Christians being forced to convert to Hinduism in order to be able to return to their villages.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) placed India on its Watch List due to inadequate government responses, at various levels, to ensure the rights of religious minorities. The State Department report notes that “some state-level laws and policies restricted this (religious) freedom,” but does not designate India as a CPC country and has no “Watch List” category. India is one of the few countries where USCIRF has not been able to arrange a delegation visit, despite several attempts to obtain visas. This failure seems particularly unusual in light of the fact that the U.S. entered into a Strategic Dialogue with India in 2009 and there have been several high-level visits exchanged. Religious freedom does not appear to have been a topic for discussion in this Strategic Dialogue.

Iraq: As a sign of solidarity with the suffering Church in Iraq, on October 2-5 of this year, Bishop Gerard Kicanas of Tucson and Bishop George Murry, S.J. of Youngstown made a pastoral visit to the Church in Baghdad, Iraq, as representatives of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. They visited many Catholic churches, convents, schools and hospitals in the city and met with four Catholic communities in Baghdad: the Chaldean, Armenia, Syrian and Latin Rites. The overwhelming message of the visit was that Christians in Baghdad have suffered greatly; their faith has been tested. They desperately need improved security and economic opportunity.

The State Department report accurately observes, “The general lawlessness that permitted criminal gangs, terrorists, and insurgents to victimize citizens with impunity affected persons of all ethnicities and religious groups.” However, Christians appear to be specifically targeted; 38 percent of the violent incidents mentioned in the report were perpetrated against Christians who only make up only 1 or 2 percent of the population. Brutal attacks such as the October 2010 storming of the Syrian Catholic Church in Baghdad that left at least 58 dead and 75 wounded point to the appalling lack of security and ongoing perilous situation facing Christians and other minorities. In 2003, the Christian population of Iraq was estimated to be between 800,000 and 1.4 million. Now Christians are estimated to number between 400,000 and 600,000. The State Department report does not highlight the fact that high levels of violence and hostility have led to a disproportionate number of Christians fleeing abroad as refugees or being displaced internally.

Having earlier raised grave moral questions about U.S. military intervention in Iraq, the Conference of Catholic bishops now believe the United States bears a moral responsibility to work effectively with the Iraqi government for a “responsible transition” that provides greater security for all Iraqi citizens, expands reconciliation, promotes human rights, and provide long-

term solutions to assist refugees and international displaced persons (IDPs). This is all the more urgent given the planned withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq by the end of 2011.

Catholic Relief Services and our Conference's Migration and Refugee Service have been involved in trying to assist Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). Our government must do more to assist Iraqi refugees in the region, to provide aid to IDPs within Iraq, and to receive into our country Iraqi refugees who are unable to return home. The bishops urge more be done to assist the Christian community that has existed for centuries in Iraq and has made significant contributions to Iraqi society, especially in the health and education sectors. More must be done to protect them and other vulnerable minorities and to plan for their ability to live in peace and security within that strife-riven country.

Advancing Religious Freedom

Religion can play an important role in the public square. Pope Benedict says "the contribution of religious communities to society is undeniable."⁹ Certainly religion can be a potent inspiration for positive social change. A healthy civil society is needed for a country to have good governance and long-term sustainable development, providing the checks and balances to government to ensure transparency and accountability. Religious institutions are a vital part of civil society. Faith-based institutions, often in partnership with governments, have a longstanding track record of providing education and health services, and humanitarian and development assistance around the world to those in need, regardless of religious affiliation. For example, Catholic Relief Services has programs in about 100 countries and receives grants from the U.S. government to work in partnership with local communities to implement sustainable development projects.

Allowing religious organizations to freely make their contribution to the common good strengthens social cohesion, civil society, democratic tendencies and stability. Pope Benedict has said, "In a globalized world marked by increasingly multi-ethnic and multi-religious societies, the great religions can serve as an important factor of unity and peace for the human family."¹⁰ Peace, security and stability, promotion of human rights and economic development – these are all foreign policy goals that have been adopted by successive U.S. Administrations. Our government, at all levels, must respect the fact that religious organizations can make a substantial contribution toward these goals. It is, therefore, important for policy makers to ask: What can be done to improve religious freedom around the world?

First, the Congress and the Administration need to place a higher priority on religious freedom and the role that it plays in foreign policy. Given the growing influence of religion and religious actors in many countries, the U.S. government should be urging other governments to better protect the human rights, including the religious freedom, of all their people, including Christians and other vulnerable minorities. At the same time, the United States, through its diplomatic presence around the world and through high-level bilateral and multilateral deliberations, should seek to integrate consideration of religion and religious actors more closely into the development of foreign policy. The annual reports on religious freedom prepared by the Department of State

⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, World Day of Peace message, 1 January 2011, no. 6.

¹⁰ Ibid. no. 10.

and by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom are a start but there is too little public evidence that protection of religious freedom is factored into major bilateral foreign policy decisions on a day-to-day basis. The strategic dialogues with several key countries seldom mention protection of religious freedom in public records of discussions. The issue may have been raised in private, but there needs to be a more overt recognition of the importance that the U.S. places on protection of religious freedom. Otherwise, it may appear that our nation is going through the motions of satisfying a Congressional mandate, but not following up by making religious freedom an integral part of the foreign policy decision-making process.

Unfortunately, there was an 18-month delay in nominating an Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom. The bishops wrote twice to the Secretary of State urging that she expedite the appointment and confirmation of a well-qualified and well-placed Ambassador. After 27 months, an Ambassador was confirmed and we appreciate her leadership in examining ways to advance the cause of religious freedom and demonstrate U.S. leadership in this crucial area. We welcome opportunities to contribute on this work and our Conference welcomes the appointment of one of my brother bishops, Bishop Howard Hubbard, Chairman of our Committee on International Justice and Peace, to serve on the State Department's Religion and Foreign Policy Working Group.

Second, the Department of State needs to give greater consideration to its designation of nations as "Countries of Particular Concern (CPC)" under the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA), i.e. as nations whose governments that have tolerated "particularly severe" violations of religious freedom. In reviewing the annual International Religious Freedom reports submitted by the State Department, we noted that the same eight countries (Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Uzbekistan) have been designated CPC for the years 2010, 2009, 2008, 2007. In 2006, Vietnam substituted for Uzbekistan on the State Department's CPC list. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's (USCIRF) list of CPCs is longer, including those on the State Department's list, but adding other countries such as Iraq, Pakistan, Nigeria, and Turkmenistan based on their analysis. USCIRF also adds a Watch List of countries where trends indicate the predisposition toward severe violations of religious freedom. Countries on the USCIRF's Watch List change from year to year. This is a good practice and reflects the changing situations in various countries.

While we have little doubt that the countries on the State Department's list of CPCs warrant that designation, we remain concerned that the list is not dynamic enough and may not adequately reflect changing conditions in other countries where religious minorities are at risk. For example, the State Department's report on Pakistan states: "Despite the government's steps to protect religious minorities, the number and severity of reported high-profile cases against minorities increased during the reporting period. Organized violence against minorities increased." The report goes on to detail the high degree of tension between religious communities, the widespread societal discrimination against religious minorities and instances where police abused religious minorities in their custody. Nonetheless Pakistan is not listed as a CPC by the State Department, whereas it has been given that designation by USCIRF every year since 2004. We would encourage the State Department to consider whether the religiously motivated assassinations of Punjab Governor Salman Taseer and Minister for Minority Affairs Shahbaz Bhatti would warrant designating Pakistan as a CPC country next year.

Third, the President and the Secretary of State should consider more closely Presidential actions that might be applied to those states where particularly severe violations of religion freedom occur. The IRFA provides a range of flexible and specific actions that can be taken to address serious violations of religious freedom. While nations that have been designated as Countries of Particular Concern (CPC) have had sanctions applied -- from restrictions on funding or trade to bans on exports of crime control and defense equipment -- in most instances those sanctions were already in place for other reasons. Thus a CPC country has little motivation to change its behavior and work to improve religious freedom conditions for their own populations if there are no additional or separate negative consequences to maintaining the status quo regarding religious freedom. In addition, two of the eight CPC countries have waivers of Presidential actions. In order for human rights and religious freedom to be taken seriously, they must be factored into the decision-making process along with political, economic and security concerns.

Fourth, Congress should move expeditiously to reauthorize the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom whose mandate is set to expire tomorrow, November 18, 2011. It would be tragic if this vital institution of the International Religious Freedom Act, which passed with overwhelmingly bipartisan support in 1998, were to cease its promotion of religious freedom. The USCCB had worked closely with various Congressional offices in support of IRFA and advocated vigorously for the creation of the Office of International Religious Freedom in the Department of State and the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom. Both institutions play important roles and, with strong leadership and funding, should increasingly strengthen our nation's work for religious freedom. We have advocated strongly for the reauthorization of USCIRF and look toward other legislation that would strengthen both USCIRF and the Office of International Religious Freedom in their mission to promote religious freedom abroad.

Conclusion

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom's annual report released on April 28, 2011 and the State Department's Religious Freedom Report for the period July 1, 2010 to December 31, 2010 both chronicle disturbing incidents of governmental or societal harassment and violence, sometimes resulting in death, directed at individuals and groups based on their religious beliefs or practices. How governments respond to religious actors and organizations within their own countries can have wide ranging and profound implications for human rights more widely.

As his predecessor, Blessed John Paul II, had done before him, Pope Benedict XVI hosted a day of reflection, dialogue and prayer for peace and justice in the world in Assisi on October 27, 2011. This gathering of world religious leaders is a powerful reminder that religious freedom allows religions to make positive contributions to social justice and peace.

As Pope Benedict said in this year's World Day of Peace Message, "Whenever the legal system at any level, national or international, allows or tolerates religious or antireligious fanaticism, it fails in its mission, which is to protect and promote justice and the rights of all." To deny an individual or a group their religious freedom is to deny them their inherent human dignity and

respect. Repression of religion so often leads to conflict, instability, violence – the very antithesis of a just and peaceful social order that we all seek. Religion can play a vital role in promoting social justice, stability, accountability and harmony within society, especially when religious leaders come together to work on resolution of common problems. In identifying religious freedom “as the fundamental path to peace,” Pope Benedict called for all religious and political leaders to “renew their commitment to promoting and protecting religious freedom, and in particular to defending religious minorities.”

Let me close by commending the distinguished members of this Subcommittee for holding this hearing and for raising the profile of religious freedom in our nation’s conscience and in its foreign policy. The promotion of religious freedom strengthens the welfare of our nation and world.