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**THE U.S. CATHOLIC BISHOPS ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM: THOUGHTFUL, WELCOME,  
AND LONG OVERDUE**

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The National Conference of Catholic Bishops' November 1988 "Statement on Religious Freedom in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union" is entirely welcome, and on several counts.

First, it marks the formal re-entry of the Catholic bishops of the United States into the religious liberty debate after far too long a period of silence.

Second, it demonstrates that the bishops' concerns for the pursuit of peace have indeed been linked (theoretically, if not always at the level of "prudential judgment") with the pursuit of freedom and the defense of basic human rights. The "challenge of peace," which the bishops addressed in 1983, includes the "challenge of religious liberty." And, just perhaps, a small fraction of the press attention that was devoted to the bishops' earlier quarrels with the strategic policies of the Reagan Administration will now be devoted to the bishops' critique of social justice within the countries of the Warsaw Pact.

Third, it suggests that problems of religious liberty -- the first of human rights -- will once again take their place on the pastoral, liturgical, and political agenda of American Catholicism, after an absence of a generation. The great majority of American Catholics are descended from men and women who came to these shores (usually but a generation or two ago) to escape religious, social, and economic oppression. Yet few of the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of those immigrants understand that they are living in the greatest century of persecution in the history of the Church. The bishops' statement is a useful reminder of that hard truth, and the responsibilities to the persecuted brethren that derive from it.

The bishops' statement is also welcome for its analytic care and judicious tone. The modest achievements of glasnost and perestroika are noted without premature cynicism or premature euphoria. The nuances of the Church's situation in such different locales as Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Lithuania, Ukraine, and Albania are carefully drawn. The statement would have been further strengthened had its analysis of the various strategies utilized by Marxist-Leninist governments against the Church included the strategy of co-optation (in, for example, groups like the Czechoslovakian "Pacem in Terris"), particularly since that strategy (rather than the classic Stalinist strategy of direct confrontation) is now

being employed in Nicaragua. But intra-ecclesiastical propriety may have precluded too forthright a descriptive portrait here.

The bishops' policy recommendations are less developed than their analysis. The bishops endorse expanded programs of exchange between religious institutions in the East and the West, but they do not spell out the crucial importance of exchange efforts with dissident or "unregistered" believers. Nor do the bishops discuss the difficulty of exchange work with Catholic or ecumenical groups that function, wittingly or otherwise, as instruments of Soviet, East German, or Czechoslovakian state policy.

More suggestively, the bishops recommend that "norms of corporate responsibility . . . used to evaluate the appropriateness of U.S. business presence and activities in other parts of the world" be applied to "businesses operating in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union." On the basis of this recommendation, one hopes that the United States Catholic Conference will work with organizations currently involved in developing just such "norms of corporate responsibility" according to the model of the Sullivan Principles in South Africa.

In a useful challenge to some movement conservatives, the bishops correctly note the utility of the Helsinki Accords review process which, in their judgment, has "encouraged the formation of independent human rights monitoring groups throughout the Soviet bloc, has focused international attention on human rights issues, has legitimized the efforts of governmental and nongovernmental organizations to raise human rights concerns directly with the signatory governments, and has directly linked the issues of human rights and security in Europe." All of which is true, and well worth repeating. But could the bishops not have brought themselves, just this once, to acknowledge the strong role played by U.S. ambassadors Max Kampelman and Warren Zimmerman at the Madrid and Vienna CSCE review conferences, and the active encouragement given by such Reagan Administration officials as Assistant Secretary of State Richard Schifter to numerous non-governmental organizations interested in pressing the case for religious liberty through the various CSCE fora? The bishops have been quite free, in recent years, with their criticism of the U.S. government; a sense of fairness would have dictated a formal recognition of good work as that is measured by the bishops' own standards. Perhaps a kinder, gentler National Conference of Catholic Bishops will see fit to give praise where praise is due in the future.

Will the bishops' statement presage a new ecumenical interest in problems of religious liberty in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union? That would be one important outcome of the bishops' labors. The churches and ecumenical agencies who have been reluctant to press the religious liberty issue in East/West dialogues (because of nuclear weapons concerns, ideological considerations, ecumenical anxiety, or whatever) have even less reason to continue in their reluctance now, what with Mr. Gorbachev criticizing his own system in ways that would never have occurred to the mainline/oldline American Protestant leadership during the

1980s. And thus a statement similar to the bishops' from the National Council of Churches would be just as welcome--and just as overdue.

At the close of the 1988 celebration of the Millennium of Christianity among the eastern Slavs, one sensed that the religious liberty issue was coming alive, once again, in American Christianity. The "Appeal for Religious Freedom in the Soviet Union on the Occasion of the Millennium of Christianity in Kievan Rus'," which I had the honor to lead, drew the signatures of American Christian leaders from across the political and ideological spectrums--and to a detailed bill of legal reforms required if the promise of glasnost and perestroika is to become a reality for Soviet believers. It is quite probable that there is no other issue of public policy on which our 400 signatories would agree. But they agreed on this: that "significant progress in the matter of human rights, and especially on the fundamental right of religious freedom, will contribute to a new pattern of relationships between [the United States and the Soviet Union], and thereby enhance the prospects of peace--as the "Appeal" put it to President Gorbachev. (That the message hit home was evidenced in part by the fact that key leaders in the "Appeal" project had subsequent visa difficulties with Soviet officials.)

Such broad ecumenical agreement on the priority of religious liberty in any meaningful scheme of human rights, and the willingness of a wide variety of American religious leaders to link religious liberty and the quest for peace, seem to me indicators of important and welcome shifts in the wind at the close of the 1980s.