

January 14, 2011

Dear Member of Congress,

As a new Congress begins, I write to congratulate you and to outline principles and priorities that guide the public policy efforts of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). As President of the Bishops' Conference, I assure you of our prayers and hopes that this newly elected Congress will advance the common good and defend the life and dignity of all, especially vulnerable and poor persons whose needs are critical in this time of difficult economic and policy choices. We continue to seek ways to work constructively with the Administration and the new Congress and others of good will to pursue policies which respect the dignity of all human life and bring greater justice to our nation and peace to our world.

As bishops, of course we approach public policy not as politicians but as pastors and teachers. Our moral principles have always guided our everyday experience in caring for the hungry and homeless, offering health care and housing, educating children and reaching out to those in need. We lead the largest community of faith in the United States, one that serves every part of our nation and is present in almost every place on earth. From our experience and our tradition, we offer a distinctive, constructive and principled contribution to the national dialogue on how to defend human life and dignity, promote and protect marriage and family life, lift up those who experience economic turmoil and suffering, and promote peace in a world troubled by war and violence.

Most fundamentally, we will work to protect the lives of the most vulnerable and voiceless members of the human family, especially **unborn children and those who are disabled or terminally ill**. We will consistently defend the fundamental right to life from conception to natural death. Opposed to abortion as the direct killing of innocent human life, we will encourage one and all to seek common ground, reducing the number of abortions by providing compassionate and morally sound care for pregnant women and their unborn children. We will oppose legislative and other measures to expand abortion. We will work to retain essential, widely supported policies which show respect for unborn life, protect the conscience rights of health care providers and other Americans, and prevent government funding and promotion of abortion. The Hyde amendment and other provisions which for many years have prevented federal funding of abortion have a proven record of reducing abortions, and should be codified in permanent law. Efforts to force Americans to fund abortions with their tax dollars pose a serious moral challenge, and Congress should act to ensure that health care reform does not become a vehicle for such funding.

In close connection with our defense of all human life and particularly the most vulnerable among us, we stand firm in our **support for marriage** which is and can only be a faithful, exclusive, lifelong union of one man and one woman. There is good reason why the law has always recognized this, and why it should continue to do so. In a manner unlike any other relationship, marriage makes a unique and irreplaceable contribution to the common good of society, especially through the procreation and

education of children. Children need, deserve and yearn for a mother and a father. All human societies in every era of history, differing greatly among themselves in many other ways, have understood this simple wisdom. No other kinds of personal relationships can be justly made equivalent or analogous to the commitment of a husband and a wife in marriage, because no other relationship can connect children to the two people who brought them into the world. For this reason, we will continue to vigorously support the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) and strongly oppose legislative or executive measures that seek to redefine or erode the meaning of marriage. We suggest Congressional oversight of executive actions that have the effect of undermining DOMA, such as the expansion of spousal benefits to two persons of the same sex, and the weak defense of DOMA in court against constitutional challenge. We will seek to reflect respect for the family in every policy and program, to protect the rights of children, and to uphold the rights and responsibilities of mothers and fathers to care for their children. We will also continue to monitor legislation and federal regulations that protect our children and families from the destructive repercussions of pornography, which degrades human sexuality and marital commitment.

Our nation faces continuing **economic challenges** with serious human consequences and significant moral dimensions. We will work with the Administration and Congress for budget, tax and entitlement policies that reflect the moral imperative to protect poor and vulnerable people. We advocate a clear priority for poor families and vulnerable workers in the development and implementation of economic recovery measures, including appropriate new investments, finding ways to offer opportunity and strengthening the national safety net. Poor families and low-income and jobless workers have been hurt most of all in the economic crisis. The difficult choices ahead on how to balance needs and resources, and how to proportionately allocate the burdens and sacrifices need to take into account the vulnerability and capacity of all, especially those most affected by poverty, joblessness and economic injustice. We urge the Administration and Congress to seek the common good of our nation and people above partisan politics and the demands of powerful or narrow interests.

With regard to the **education of children**, we call for a return to the equitable participation of students and teachers in private schools in programs funded through the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*. When students in private schools are counted in order to determine the total amount of federal education funds a public school district receives, the funds generated by these students should benefit them and their teachers, not be used for programs in which only public school students and personnel can participate. We also continue to support initiatives, such as tax credits and scholarship programs, which provide resources for all parents, especially those of modest means, to choose education which best addresses the needs of their children.

We welcome continuing commitments to **empower faith-based groups** as effective partners in overcoming poverty and other threats to human dignity. We will continue to work with the Administration and Congress to strengthen these partnerships in ways that do not encourage government to abandon its responsibilities, and do not require religious groups to abandon their identity or mission.

As the Internet continues to grow in its influence and prominence in Americans' lives, we support legislation and federal regulations that ensure **equal access to the Internet** for all, including religious and non-profit agencies, as well as those in more sparsely populated or economically distressed areas. True net neutrality is necessary for people to flourish in a democratic society.

The Catholic Bishops of the United States have worked for nearly a century to assure **health care for all**, insisting that access to health care is a basic human right and a requirement of human dignity. Basic health care for all is a moral imperative, not yet completely achieved. We remain committed to our three moral criteria: 1) Ensure access to quality, affordable, life-giving health care for all; 2) Retain longstanding requirements that federal funds not be used for elective abortions or plans that include them, and effectively protect conscience rights; and 3) Protect the access to health care that immigrants currently have and remove current barriers to access. We will continue to devote our efforts to improving and correcting serious moral problems in the current law, so health care reform can truly be universal and life-affirming.

We will work with the Administration and the new Congress to fix a broken **immigration** system which harms both immigrants and our entire nation. Comprehensive reform is needed to deal with the economic and human realities of millions of immigrants in our midst. We realize that reform must be based on respect for and implementation of the law and for the legitimate and timely question of national security. Equally, however, it must defend the rights and dignity of all peoples, recognizing that human dignity comes from God and does not depend on where people were born or how they came to our nation. Truly comprehensive immigration reform will include a path to earned citizenship, with attention to the fact that international trade and development policies influence economic opportunities in the countries from which immigrants come. It also must foster family reunification, the bedrock principle upon which our national immigration system has been based for decades. Immigration enforcement policies should honor basic human rights and uphold basic due process protections.

On **international affairs**, we will work with our leaders to seek responsible transitions to end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and promote religious freedom for all, acting against religious repression of our fellow Christians and others. The recent attacks against Christians in Egypt, Iraq and Nigeria and the assassination of a Pakistani governor who opposed blasphemy laws highlight an appalling trend of increased violence aimed at vulnerable minority communities. In all foreign policy deliberations, we urge a greater emphasis on human rights, especially religious freedom, which we view as an essential good so intricately tied to other human rights and to the promotion of peace.

We especially urge continued and persistent leadership to bring a just peace to the Holy Land, to promote peaceful change in Sudan, and to rebuild Haiti. We will continue to support essential U.S. investments to overcome global poverty, hunger and disease through increased and reformed international assistance. Continued U.S. leadership in the fight against HIV-AIDS and other diseases in ways that are both effective and

morally appropriate have our enthusiastic backing. Recognizing the complexity of climate change, we wish to be a voice for the poor and vulnerable in our country and around the world who will be the most adversely affected by threats to the environment.

This outline of USCCB policies and priorities is not complete. There are many other areas of concern and advocacy for the Church and the USCCB. For a more detailed description of our concerns please see *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* (USCCB 2007), pages 19-30.

Nonetheless, we offer this outline as an agenda for dialogue and action. We hope to offer a constructive and principled contribution to national discussion about the values and policies that will shape our nation's future. We seek to work together with our nation's leaders to advance the common good of our society, while disagreeing respectfully and civilly where necessary in order to preserve that common good. I am enclosing a brochure from our Office of Government Relations, directed by Nancy Wisdo, for your future contacts with the Conference.

In closing, I thank you for responding to the noble call of public service and I renew our expression of hope and our offer of cooperation as you begin this new period of service to our nation in these challenging times. We promise our prayers for all of you, and in a special way for your colleague Gabrielle Giffords and all those killed or injured in the horrific attack in Tucson. We hope that the days ahead will be a time of renewal and progress for our nation as we defend human life and dignity, seek greater justice for all God's children, and bring peace to a suffering world.

With prayerful best wishes, I am
Faithfully and respectfully yours,

Most Reverend Timothy M. Dolan
Archbishop of New York
President, USCCB