



Committee on International Justice and Peace

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August 26, 2015

United States Senate
United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20510/20515

Dear Senator/Representative:

On behalf of the Committee on International Justice and Peace of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), I urge Congress to work urgently to reauthorize the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF). The Catholic Church views protection of religious freedom as a “cornerstone of the structure of human rights” since it is rooted in the dignity of the human person.

At a time when religious freedom appears to be more imperiled globally, it is vital that USCIRF be reauthorized before its September 30th authorization expires in order to continue its excellent work of raising the profile of those who are discriminated against, harassed and even killed for their faith. USCCB has long advocated for the reauthorizations of USCIRF because of its vital role in promoting human dignity and human rights around the world by monitoring and promoting religious freedom.

As the Pew Research Center reports indicate, roughly a quarter of the world’s countries are still grappling with high levels of religious hostilities within their borders. Christians and members of other minority groups are seeking refuge from violence in Syria and Iraq. Religious minorities are jailed on blasphemy and apostasy charges in Pakistan, Burma, and Sudan, just to note a few countries where vulnerable persons can be killed with impunity. As stated in USCIRF’s 2015 Annual Report, in Nigeria, “Boko Haram has attacked both Muslims and Christians. From mass murders at churches and mosques to mass kidnappings of children from schools, Boko Haram has cut a wide path of terror across vast swaths of Nigeria.” All these cases are indicative of a worldwide pandemic of religious intolerance that is threatening the stability of so many countries.

In an August 5, 2015, message to the Knight of Columbus, Pope Francis stated: “The protection of religious freedom must ... engage the consciences of believers on the global level, in response to the attacks unleashed on minority communities, most often Christian, in various parts of our world.” He went on to say that we must pray “for the conversion of hearts, an end to fanatical violence and intolerance, and a general recognition of those fundamental human rights which are not granted by the state, but from the hand of the Creator, whom all believers invoke as a God of peace.”

Protecting religious freedom is critical to the health of societies. In light of Pope Francis’ remarks and the Catholic Church’s long standing commitment to religious freedom around the world, I urge members of Congress to reauthorize USCIRF before its authorization expires on September 30th.

Sincerely yours,

Most Reverend Oscar Cantú
Bishop of Las Cruces

Chairman, Committee on International Justice and Peace