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The U.S. bishops respond to the crisis

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 21, 2006 All Things Catholic

On July 17, Bishop Thomas G. Wenski of Orlando, chair of the U.S. bishops? Committee on International Policy, issued a statement faulting Hamas and Hezbollah for triggering the present crisis, criticizing Israeli attacks on civilian infrastructure, expressing solidarity with the Lebanese, and asking the United States to exercise greater leadership to bring a halt to the violence.

On July 18, the U.S. bishops? conference staff prepared a set of talking points for social action directors in dioceses around the country about the statement. Among other things, it stressed that ?we know who started the current cycle of violence,? meaning ?extreme factions of Hamas and Hezbollah,? which, it said, was obviously intended to provoke a military response. The talking points said that ?we recognize the right of Israel to defend itself.?

Nevertheless, they continued, Israel?s response ?has been *in some instances* militarily disproportionate and indiscriminate.? The italic emphasis is in the original.

These comments reflect an irony often noted by observers of statements from the U.S. bishops on the Middle East over the years. Because of the pro-Israeli nature of American politics, U.S. Catholics are usually among the most sensitive to Israeli concerns in global Catholicism; yet given the generally pro-Palestinian tilt of Catholic opinion in other parts of the world, Catholics here are often among the most sensitive voices to the Palestinians in American debate.

In other words, because U.S. Catholics are pulled in both directions by different forces, their positions often come across as strikingly balanced.

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