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Church leaders on the Middle East crisis: Wenski

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

This week saw some extraordinary engagement from the Catholic church on the crisis in Lebanon. The Holy See joined a 15-nation summit in Rome and the spokesman for the U.S. bishops on international policy, Bishop Thomas Wenski of Orlando, was outspoken on the crisis in an exclusive interview with *NCR*.

One thing that has become clear is a deep, and growing, division of opinion between the church and the Bush administration (in addition to the Israelis) over the wisdom of an immediate cease-fire.

The White House believes that simply freezing things in place now would allow Hezbollah time to regroup, all but ensuring that any truce would be temporary, and that the all-too-familiar cycle of terrorist attacks followed by Israeli responses would continue. Opposition from Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice blocked a call for a cease-fire in Rome; she argued the situation cannot return to the *status quo ante*.

Catholic leaders, on the other hand, have argued that no lasting peace can emerge from violence, and therefore the first order of business must be to prevent further bloodshed. Calls for an immediate cease-fire have come from the Vatican's top diplomat, Archbishop Giovanni Lajolo, and from Wenski in the name of the U.S. bishops' Committee on International Policy.

Wenski elaborated on his position in the *NCR* interview, insisting that "the more people who are killed, the more the fighting escalates, the more infrastructure is destroyed, the more difficult it becomes for all sides to find common ground to negotiate."

?That?s why the cease-fire is so important,? Wenski said. ?It would allow us to take a deep breath, to let reason direct policy rather than reactions of anger to hurts old or new.?

Analysts say the current stand-off between the United States and the church bears striking parallels to the diplomatic impasse over the U.S.-led Iraq war in 2003.

My news story on the response from church leaders is on NCRonline.org.

The full text of the Wenski interview is in the Special Documents section of NCRonline.org.

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