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Honorable George W. Bush  
President of the United States  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20052

Mr. President:

I write to you an issue of crucial importance to the Roman Catholic Church and various other religious denominations in the United States---the Religious Worker Visa Program (RWVP). More specifically, my concerns focus upon a proposed rule recently issued by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service (USCIS) of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) which would drastically alter how the program is implemented. In my view and that of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), the proposed rule could limit the entry of the types of religious workers needed for our pastoral mission and add overly burdensome application requirements which could render the program unusable.

As you may know, Mr. President, the RWVP provides many benefits to religious communities as well as the greater public throughout the United States. Religious workers, as well as performing pastoral duties, often provide needed services to local residents through social service programs and programs based in our parishes. It helps our dioceses reach out to immigrant communities, as well, that often need support and encouragement in their new land.

Mr. President, the proposed rule issued April 25, 2007, by USCIS would limit our ability to provide these services and to minister to our/my flock because of the additional restrictions placed on the program.

For example, the rule would alter the definition of religious occupation, religious vocation, and religious minister in a more restrictive way, denying the entry of workers who are not fully compensated, who may have taken interim vows, or who may not perform all the religious functions of a denomination, such as a deacon. It would require a special immigrant religious worker to have worked at least two years as a full-time compensated employee before entering the United States. In addition, the proposed rule would add a complex and burdensome attestation to individual cases, among other requirements.

While these requirements may seem reasonable from a business perspective, a religious organization, as you know, does not function as a business. Some of our religious may not receive direct compensation and may work part-time in one area and in other areas the rest of the time.

Moreover, the rule places additional restrictions and limitations on the program. It would require an applicant to file a petition with USCIS in the United States as opposed to a consulate overseas, as is the normal practice. This is impractical for many of these workers. It also would shorten the initial admission period from 3 to 1 year for nonimmigrant religious workers, limiting our ability to predict and plan for our employment needs into the future.

Mr. President, we support your efforts to ensure that the RWVP is a secure one and is free of fraudulent applications. The proposed rule, however, represents a one-size fits all approach and does not take into account the unique needs and operating structure of religious organizations. I urge you to instruct your staff to work with the USCCB and other religious groups to fashion a rule which creates a program which is usable, effective, safe, and transparent.

Thank you for your consideration of my views.