

Free-trade issue not on campaign front burner

Agostino Bono/CNS

WASHINGTON — In today's globalized world, the United States is the economic superpower, making free-market capitalism the only game in town for poor countries that want to carve out a bigger share of world trade.

President Bush has continued the push of his predecessors for free-trade agreements around the world, but discussion of the pros and cons of these agreements is not on the front burner in this year's presidential campaign.

Yet the positions of Bush and his Democratic opponent, Sen. John F.

Kerry of Massachusetts, have strong implications for the developing world; and the entire issue is of concern to church officials in the Americas.

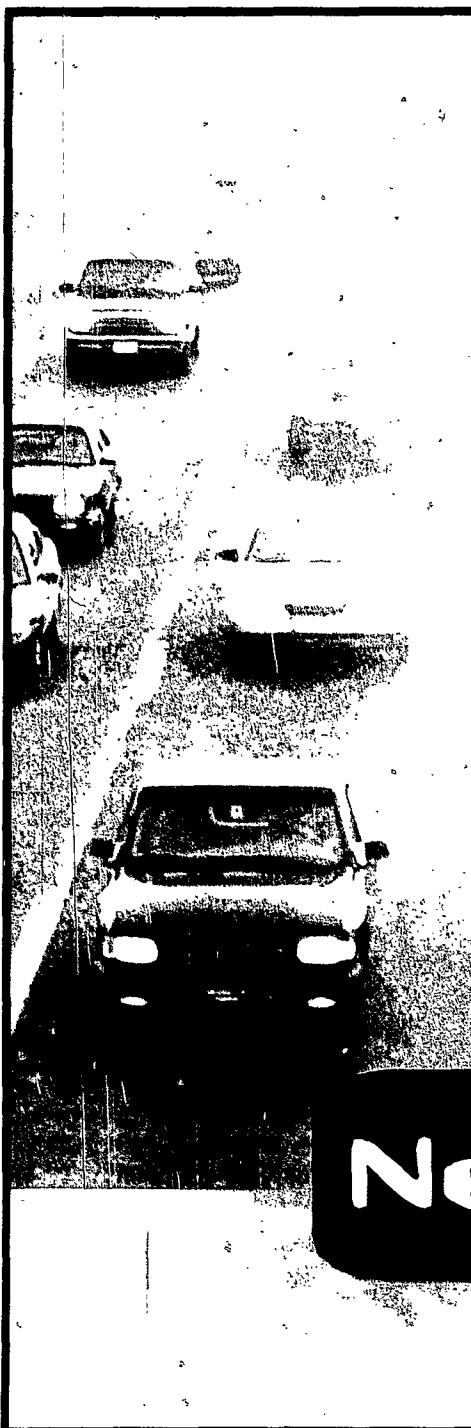
"Faithful Citizenship: A Catholic Call to Political Responsibility," the U.S. bishops' 2003 document offering a Catholic perspective on election issues, says the United States has the "capacity and responsibility" to address issues of world poverty and underdevelopment. It asks for a comprehensive U.S. development program which includes "more equitable trade policies."

Bishops from Mexico and Central America have questioned whether



Carlos Lopez-Barillas/CNS

An unidentified man begs for money in Guatemala City, Guatemala, June 11. The issue of free-trade agreements is an urgent one for U.S. and Latin American bishops. Church officials call for "more equitable trade policies" that will help the poor and vulnerable of the countries involved.



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6am - 9am

News Talk 950

free-trade agreements produce more benefits than losses in poor countries.

Bishops are especially concerned that the dropping of tariffs on agricultural products in their countries, where the majority of people earn a living through farming, will put their crops at a disadvantage in comparison to the United States with its huge agribusinesses and price subsidies.

Mexicans have been living under the North American Free Trade Agreement since 1994. NAFTA implemented a free-trade zone in the United States, Mexico and Canada.

In a 2003 statement, the Mexican bishops' social-action commission said a majority of "small peasant and indigenous farmers have experienced a severe decline in their incomes and quality of life" under NAFTA. The bishops estimated that 3 million Mexican farmers are worse off while those who benefited number "in the thousands."

Kerry voted for NAFTA but has expressed second thoughts about similar free-trade agreements.

Bush has used NAFTA as a model for other free-trade agreements in the Western Hemisphere, such as the Central American Free Trade Agreement promoted by his administration. The Bush administration is also pursuing bilateral free-trade agreements with other countries and wants to widen the free-trade zone in the Americas.

Bush has also promoted free trade as a way to stabilize democracy in underdeveloped countries by promoting economic growth.

Kerry has said he would renegotiate CAFTA and all other pending trade treaties to ensure that provisions protecting the environment and safeguarding fair labor practices are included.