



## Conscientious Objection and Catholic Teaching

*Published by Pax Christi USA*

**“Never again war! No, never again war, which destroys the lives of innocent people, teaches how to kill, throws into upheaval even the lives of those who do the killing and leaves behind a trail of resentment and hatred, thus making it all the more difficult to find a just solution of the very problems which provoked the war.”**

**-Pope John Paul II, 1991**

### EARLY CHURCH HISTORY

For two thousand years, individual Christians, and entire denominations often referred to as peace churches, have refused to participate in war and the taking of human lives. People of various belief systems continue this tradition as conscientious objectors: those who hold sincere convictions, motivated by conscience, which forbid their participation in war.

Christians for the first three centuries almost universally refused to serve in the Roman army – they could not kill when the principal Christian command was to love. This changed as Christianity became the favored religion of the Roman Empire. St. Augustine of Hippo articulated the basis for what we now call Just War theory in the early 400s (later expanded upon by St. Thomas Aquinas).

### CONSCIENCE

Conscience calls us to loyalty to God and God’s teachings above loyalty to any person, institution or nation-state. Catholics who believe war and participation in war violate the teachings of Christ are morally bound to obey their consciences under the Church’s teaching of the primacy of conscience.

### JESUS, SCRIPTURE, MORALITY AND WAR

Many individuals who sincerely love their country have refused to kill in its name. The life and teachings of Jesus, the Sermon on the Mount, the fifth commandment, the call to forgiveness, the recognition of all people as God’s children and the command to love our enemies are some of the reasons Christians are conscientious objectors. The recognition that war and the very structure of the military itself which emphasizes obeying orders rather than following conscience also leads many Christians to refuse to participate in war.

### JUST WAR THEORY

Even the basis of Just War theory is a desire for peace; Just War theory lays out strict conditions under which a war is acceptable. For a brief discussion on Just War theory by the U.S.

Catholic Bishops, see *Excerpts from The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace*, at [www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/justwar.htm](http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/international/justwar.htm).

Many people of faith and religious leaders question whether *any* war can be considered just because of the potential damage that can come from the use of nuclear, biological or chemical weapons, as well as the massive use of conventional weapons. Wars are no longer fought primarily on battlefields between militaries; instead, wars often kill and harm civilians and destroy the infrastructure on which their lives depend. By the 1990s, civilians accounted for 90 percent of war casualties.

### CATHOLIC TEACHING AND CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION

The Vatican and U.S. Catholic Bishops support conscientious objection for those for whom military participation would be a violation of deeply held moral convictions. In the U.S. Bishops’ Declaration on Conscientious Objection and Selective Conscientious Objection, U.S. Bishops wrote, “...It is clear that a Catholic can be a conscientious objector to war in general or to a particular war ‘because of religious training and belief.’...we should regard conscientious objection and selective conscientious objection as positive indicators within the Church of a sound moral awareness and respect for human life.” The Bishops reaffirmed their support in their November 2002 statement on Iraq.

Selective conscientious objectors reject war or military participation under certain circumstances. Selective conscientious objectors might believe it is immoral to serve in a capacity where they would be responsible for using nuclear weapons. Or they might decide they couldn’t morally participate in a particular war. Unfortunately, while selective conscientious objection is recognized by the Catholic Church, it is not recognized by the U.S. military. Thus, Catholics in the United States who follow Just War theory are not permitted to become conscientious objectors.

## WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Learn more about Catholic teaching on war, conscientious objection and conscientious objectors.

- Share what you learn with family, friends, coworkers, places of worship and the media. Help people understand that conscientious objectors are not traitors or cowards but are living out their faith and following their consciences.

- Consider being trained to assist young people (both those in the military and those who may be drafted) through the complex process to become a conscientious objector.

- Talk with young people before they enter the military. Learn about the many reasons for joining the military and the influence factors such as race and class have on that decision and on treatment while in the military.

## SOME HELPFUL RESOURCES

### *Resources on War, Conscience and Faith:*

Gremillion, Joseph, ed. *The Gospel of Peace and Justice*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1976.

John XXIII. *Peace on Earth (Pacem in Terris)*. papal encyclical. Washington, D.C.: USCC Office for Publishing and Promotion Services, 1963.

Merton, Thomas. *Faith and Violence: Christian Teaching and Christian Practice*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968.

National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Challenge of Peace*. Washington, D.C.: USCC Office for Publishing and Promotion Services, 1983.

National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace*. Washington, D.C.: USCC Office for Publishing and Promotion Services, 1993.

National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Human Life in Our Day*. Washington, D.C.: USCC Publishing and Promotion Services, 1968, nos. 143-153.

Second Vatican Council, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*. Rome, Italy: Second Vatican Council, 1965.

United States Catholic Conference, *Declaration on Conscientious Objection and Selective Conscientious Objection*. Washington: USCC Publishing and Promotion Services, 1971.

Zahn, Gordon C. "Conscientious Objection: Catholic Perspectives." Erie, Penn.: Pax Christi USA, 1991 (PCUSA Item # 525-188; \$1 each).

### *Conscientious Objection and Resistance to War:*

*Blood Makes the Grass Grow: Conscientious Objectors and the Gulf War*. Video. Available from AFSC's Youth and Militarism Program, [www.afsc.org/youthmil.htm](http://www.afsc.org/youthmil.htm) or 215/241-7176.

Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors. "Advice for COs in the Armed Services." \$3.00.

General Board of Church and Society, United Methodist Church, with the Center on Conscience and War. "Conscientious Objectors and the Draft." Published 2002. Available by calling 202/483-2220 or 800/967-0800. \$2.00.

Lynd, Staughton and Alice Lynd. *Nonviolence in America: A Documentary History*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1995.

Schlissel, Lillian, ed. *Conscience in America: A Documentary History of Conscientious Objection in America, 1757-1967*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1968.

Zahn, Gordon. *In Solitary Witness: The Life and Death of Franz Jaegerstatter*. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1964.

Zuses, Rachel S. *Words of Conscience*. 11th ed. Washington, D.C.: Center on Conscience and War, 2001.

### *Organizations:*

Center on Conscience and War, 1830 Connecticut Ave. NW, Washington, D.C. 20009; 202/483-2220 or 800/379-2670; [nisbco@nisbco.org](mailto:nisbco@nisbco.org); [www.nisbco.org](http://www.nisbco.org)

Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors, 1515 Cherry St., Philadelphia, Penn. 19102; 215/563-8787 or 630 20th St., Oakland, Calif. 94612; 510/465-2459; [info@objector.org](mailto:info@objector.org); [www.objector.org](http://www.objector.org)

Fund for Education and Training (for men who do not register for the draft for reasons of conscience): [www.nisbco.org/FEAT.htm](http://www.nisbco.org/FEAT.htm)

Military Law Task Force of the National Lawyers Guild, 1168 Union, Suite 200, San Diego, Calif. 92101; 619/233-1701.

G.I. Rights Hotline, 800/FYI-95GI; [www.girights.org](http://www.girights.org) (nongovernmental resource for service members encountering difficulties or wanting information about discharges)



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