

Guidance on Questions of Conscience and Military Service United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

August 21, 2007

The reality of war always intensifies questions of conscience related to military service. In the months immediately prior to the Iraq war, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) stated:

We pray for all those most likely to be affected by this potential conflict, especially the suffering people of Iraq and the men and women who serve in our armed forces. We support those who risk their lives in the service of our nation. We also support those who seek to exercise their right to conscientious objection and selective conscientious objection, as we have stated in the past.

Statement on Iraq, USCCB, November 13, 2002

Support for those who make decisions of conscience regarding war finds frequent expression in the teaching of the Church. Both decisions to serve in the military and to refrain from such service ought to be guided by a well-formed conscience. The Church offers moral guidance and pastoral support to Catholics struggling with these decisions. They are encouraged to consult with a priest or chaplain.

The following excerpts from Church documents provide a starting point for such guidance. It should be noted that selective conscientious objection is not currently recognized in U.S. law.

***Catechism of the Catholic Church* Second Edition, 1994, 1997**

Public authorities, in this case, have the right and duty to impose on citizens the obligations necessary for national defense.

Those who are sworn to serve their country in the armed forces are servants of the security and freedom of nations. If they carry out their duty honorably, they truly contribute to the common good of the nation and the maintenance of peace. (#2310)

Public authorities should make equitable provision for those who for reasons of conscience refuse to bear arms; these are nonetheless obliged to serve the human community in some other way. (#2311)

Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004

Defending peace

The requirements of legitimate defense justify the existence in States of armed forces, the activity of which should be at the service of peace. Those who defend the security and freedom of a country, in such a spirit, make an authentic contribution to peace. Everyone who serves in the armed forces is concretely called to defend good, truth and justice in the world. Many are those who, in such circumstances, have sacrificed their lives for these values and in defense of

innocent lives. Very significant in this regard is the increasing number of military personnel serving in multinational forces on humanitarian or peace-keeping missions promoted by the United Nations. (#502)

Every member of the armed forces is morally obliged to resist orders that call for perpetrating crimes against the law of nations and the universal principles of this law. Military personnel remain fully responsible for the acts they commit in violation of the rights of individuals and peoples, or of the norms of international humanitarian law. Such acts cannot be justified by claiming obedience to the orders of superiors.

Conscientious objectors who, out of principle, refuse military service in those cases where it is obligatory because their conscience rejects any kind of recourse to the use of force or because they are opposed to the participation in a particular conflict, must be open to accepting alternative forms of service. "It seems just that laws should make humane provision for the case of conscientious objectors who refuse to carry arms, provided they accept some other form of community service." (#503)

The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response
National Conference of Catholic Bishops
May 3, 1983

The Christian has no choice but to defend peace, properly understood, against aggression. This is an inalienable obligation. It is the how of defending peace which offers moral options. We stress this principle again because we observe so much misunderstanding about both those who resist bearing arms and those who bear them. Great numbers from both traditions provide examples of exceptional courage, examples the world continues to need. (#73)

The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace
National Conference of Catholic Bishops
November 17, 1993

There is a need to improve the legal and practical protection which this country rightly affords conscientious objectors and, in accord with the just-war tradition, to provide similar legal protection for selective conscientious objectors. Selective conscientious objection poses complex, substantive and procedural problems, which must be worked out by moralists, lawyers and civil servants in a way that respects the rights of conscience without undermining the military's ability to defend the common good. Given the particular problems that arise in the context of an all-volunteer military, individual objectors must exercise their rights in a responsible way, and there must be reliable procedures to verify the validity of their claims. Especially in cases where military service is compulsory, it is appropriate for the government to require alternative service to the community; this may be in or outside a military setting, depending on the abilities and conscience of the particular individual.

Additional resources can be found on this web page:
www.usccb.org/sdwp/peace/consciencewar.shtml