

United States Catholic Conference, Division
of World Peace and Justice.
Statement on the Catholic... ADW 7564

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Statement on

The

Catholic

Conscientious

Objector

October 15, 1969

SINCE Apostolic times, the Church has cherished and valued the spirit of non-violence based on the teaching of Jesus. This is one of the reasons Christians of the early Church did not participate in military service. There was even a strong tendency toward pacifism. The Church Fathers, St. Ambrose and St. Augustine, emphasized the primacy of love, going so far as to state that Christians as individuals had no right to self-defense. Christians, however, were allowed to take part in communal defense if the war was considered just.

THE theory of the just war, beginning with St. Augustine and later developed by Catholic theologians such as St. Thomas Aquinas and Francis Suarez, required that certain conditions be met: The war must be declared only as a last resort by a lawful authority, for a just cause, using just means, and with reasonable expectation of success. The military action cannot produce a greater evil than it seeks to correct. In applying an evolving just war theory to the contemporary world, the person who is sincerely trying to form his conscience must judge whether or not the end achieved by a particular war or all-out war is proportionate, in any degree, to the devastation wrought by that war. On the basis of this judgment, he would justify either participation in or abstention from war.

IN abstaining, some might conclude that just war in the modern world is not possible, citing Pope John's statement in *Pacem in Terris*: "Therefore, in this age of ours which prides itself on its atomic power, it is irrational to believe that war is still an apt means of vindicating violated rights." (n. 127) "No more war, war never again," were the words of Pope Paul VI to the General Assembly of the United Nations.

IN the continuing condemnation of total warfare by recent popes, the Second Vatican Council declared that —

every act of war directed to the indiscriminate destruction of whole cities or vast areas with their inhabitants is a crime against God and man which merits firm and unequivocal condemnation. (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 80)

A Catholic viewing his tradition, the message of the Gospel statements, could validly question and abstain from participation in war or the preparations for war.

THE Second Vatican Council, therefore, endorsed laws that would —

make human provision for the care of those who for reasons of conscience refuse to bear arms, provided, however, that they accept some other form of service to the human community. (*GS*, n. 79)

FROM the previously stated documents and traditions, it is clear that a Catholic (either in-service or out-of-service) can be a conscientious objector "because of religious training and belief."

We are, therefore, concerned when we hear that some boards and military tribunals do not recognize a Catholic claim for military exemption by reason of conscience. On the other hand, we are encouraged by recent court decisions and the actions of draft boards which uphold the primacy of conscience in this regard.

BUT it is not enough merely to declare that a Catholic can be a conscientious objector. Christians must "make humane provisions" for the conscientious objector

and aid him in his "service to the human community." What he often lacks is basic information about the draft and its alternatives. He meets opposition from those who should, in fact, be counseling and aiding him. Once granted the status of a conscientious objector, he often finds himself in a menial and degrading alternative service in order to "test his sincerity." We therefore recommend:

1. *That each diocese initiate or cooperate in providing draft information and counseling;*
2. *That Catholic Organizations which could qualify as alternative service agencies consider applying for that status, and support and provide meaningful employment for the conscientious objector.*

WE are not only concerned about the status of the conscientious objector, but also concerned about that of the Selective Conscientious Objector. His status is complicated by the fact that his claim for exemption is not upheld by law. The American bishops spoke at some length in their pastoral letter of November, 1968, *Human Life in Our Day*, of the Selective Conscientious Objector, recommending —

a modification of the Selective Service Act making it possible, although not easy, for so-called selective conscientious objectors to refuse—without fear of imprisonment or loss of citizenship — to serve in wars which they consider unjust or in branches of service (e.g., the strategic nuclear forces) which would subject them to the performance of actions contrary to deeply held moral convictions about indiscriminate killing.

IN reaffirming this recommendation, we are reminded of the number of individuals who have suffered imprisonment or have left the country because they felt compelled to follow their conscience rather than the law. In a continuing pastoral concern for their welfare, we urge civil officials, as part of a revision of the law as regards to the Selective Conscientious Objector, to consider granting amnesty to those who have suffered imprisonment and give those who have left the country an opportunity to demonstrate that they are sincere objectors.

IN conclusion, we encourage clergy and laymen alike, especially parents, to be sympathetic and understanding to those who in good conscience are compelled to object to military service, even if one were not in total agreement with the objector. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council wrote —

We cannot fail to praise those who renounce the use of violence in the vindication of their rights and who resort to methods of defense which are otherwise available to weaker parties, provided that this can be done without injury to the rights and duties of others or of the community itself. (GS, n. 78)

WE should look upon conscientious objection not as a scandal, but rather as a healthy sign. War will still not be replaced by more humane institutions for regulating conflict until citizens insist on principles of non-violence. John F. Kennedy once said, "War will exist until the distant day when the conscientious objector enjoys the same reputation and prestige as the warrior does today."

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