

"In the light of the Gospel and from an analysis of the Church's teaching on conscience, 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." As we hold individuals in high esteem who conscientiously serve in the armed forces, so also 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 (U.S. Bishops, *Declaration of Conscientious Objection and Selective Conscientious Objection*.)

The Church and Conscientious Objection

A Christian is under the moral obligation to defend peace against violence. Our Church teaches that we as Catholics have two options in choosing "how" to defend peace. We may defend peace either by using active nonviolent means – such as prayer, the works of mercy, and nonviolent civilian defense techniques – or by participating in a war that has met the "just-war" criteria. A Catholic does *not* have the option to participate in an unjust war, even if it is for good intentions.

Conscientious objection (CO) is a sincere belief that forbids someone from participating in 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 commandment not to kill, the call to forgiveness, and the recognition of all people as God's children and the command to love our enemies are some of the reasons Christians become conscientious objectors. The recognition that the structure of the military itself emphasizes obeying orders rather than following conscience also leads many Christians to refuse participation in war. Catholics who reject participation in war *in any form* are considered by the United States military to be conscientious objectors (COs), and can be honorably discharged from military service. Civilian COs, if they are ever drafted into military, would be eligible to apply for legal status as a conscientious objector and could perform alternative service.

However, not all Catholics are total COs. Catholics who accept the just war tradition and who come to the conclusion that a *particular* war – or a particular aspect of a war – is unjust, are considered to be selective conscientious objectors (SCOs). For example, SCOs might believe it is immoral to use nuclear weapons, but they would participate in a non-nuclear war. Or they might believe it is immoral to participate in a particular war they have found to be unjust.

While the Church supports both conscientious objection and selective conscientious objection, current U.S. law only recognizes total conscientious objection. SCOs who are in the military and refuse to participate in a war they know to be unjust must decide between violating their consciences or facing punishments like fines and imprisonment.

"Efforts must be made to help Catholics form a correct conscience in the matter, to discuss with them the duties of citizenship, and to provide them with adequate draft counseling and information services" (U.S. Bishops, *Declaration on Conscientious Objection and Selective Conscientious Objection*).

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YOUTH: If you believe you are a conscientious objector or a selective conscientious objector, **ACT NOW!** The Catholic Peace Fellowship (CPF) strongly encourages youth to write **statements of conscience** and send them to us at CPF. The statement should include the following information:

- 1) A clear statement of their opposition to all war (or unjust wars) and the religious/moral/spiritual basis for it.
- 2) An explanation of when, from what sources, and under what circumstances they developed their commitment. (Religious education? A good book or movie? A class or teacher?)
- 3) Examples and illustrations of how that commitment is demonstrated in their lifestyle, experiences, and general activity. (examples can include serving soup in a soup kitchen, tutoring underprivileged children, attending anti-war protests, etc.)

Not only will this be a positive action in order for you to clarify your own beliefs about war on a personal level, but also it will begin a “paper trail” of your beliefs as a conscientious objector. Should you ever get drafted into military service, you will have proof that your beliefs are sincere and deeply held.

PARENTS: Talk to your children about conscientious objection, especially as it relates to a potential draft. Help your children begin an entire file of conscientious objection to war. For more information on how to start a file, contact the Catholic Peace Fellowship.

OTHERS: CPF has developed an interactive presentation to use with youth in a classroom or a youth group setting. The “mock draft” is a presentation designed to activate the consciences of youth. It will help them discern where they stand on important moral issues like Church teaching on nonviolence and just war by using selective service law.

CPF is prepared to train youth ministers, teachers, and other concerned Catholics across the country in how to lead these interactive presentations. If you are interested in having CPF do a training workshop in your area, please contact us at

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