

# CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTION

Conscientious Objection (CO) is a sincere conviction, motivated by conscience, that forbids someone from participation in any and all war. If refusal is limited to a particular war or even a particular aspect of a war, this is called Selective Conscientious Objection (SCO). While the Church supports both CO and SCO, current U.S. law only recognizes total conscientious objection. Military servicemembers can be honorably discharged as a result of a successful CO claim. The Selective Service System only accepts civilian CO applications in the event of a draft; however, many people opposed to war keep a completed application ready in expectation of such an event.

In recent U.S. history, Catholic COs have played a small but growing role. Of the 2,000 granted CO status in WWI, 4 were Catholic. 135 Catholics refused to participate in World War II. During Vietnam, over 10,000 Catholics were among the 171,000 COs recognized by the Selective Service.

Today, Catholics continue the ancient tradition of conscientious objection to war...

## WE GO ON RECORD...

*Excerpted from one soldier's application for a Conscientious Objection discharge*

"I cannot deny my conscience, which recoils from violence, hate, and fear. I cannot deny the clear commandment of Love which appears both in scripture and life, but also in my heart.

"Under no circumstance can I participate in war. The only organization I can put my trust and heart into is the Kingdom of God. The only mission I can support is the mission of salvation and love. With faith and trust, and courage to follow the example of Christ, I am filled with a joyful optimism for a future guided by the hand of God."  
-Nate

# TOUGH QUESTIONS

There are some questions that almost never get asked. But once they do, the search for an answer leads many Catholics to wholeheartedly embrace the Church's nonviolence tradition.

~ The Church teaches that it is a soldier's duty to refuse immoral orders. In the heat of battle, or even if it was just my military career on the line, would I be able to refuse immoral orders and accept whatever punishment would follow?

~ St. Augustine wrote that only a person who truly loved his enemy could kill in war. Can I honestly say I can kill the people I love?

~ Jesus Christ could have called down legions of angels to defend himself, but instead chose to be tortured and killed by his enemies out of love. Can I follow His example in the military?



**"We urge a mighty league**

**of Catholic  
Conscientious  
Objectors"**

**-Dorothy Day**

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# CATHOLICS AND WAR

## THE CATHOLIC NONVIOLENCE TRADITION



**Catholic Peace Fellowship**  
**catholicpeacefellowship.org**

**Most Catholics are familiar with the Church's tradition of the Just War. They know that, according to St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, governments have a right to wage war, but that there are certain strict criteria that must be met for a war to be considered moral. However, for many years too few Catholics have been aware of the Church's rich tradition of peace, a tradition that resounds with the words of St. Martin of Tours: "I am a soldier of Christ--it is not lawful for me to fight." But now more Catholics than ever are coming to understand and appreciate the Catholic nonviolence tradition.**

**Yes, the Catholic faith has a tradition that says "No" to participation in war in all its forms. It runs from Jesus Christ to St. Paul to the early martyrs and Fathers of the Church, from St. Francis of Assisi to Erasmus, and from Vatican II to John Paul II and Benedict XVI. The Church supports those who refuse war.**

*We... 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. Catholic Bishops Conference, 1971

## **TWO THOUSAND YEARS OF CATHOLIC NONVIOLENCE**

When people think about the Church and war, they usually think of the Crusades long before they think of nonviolence. But in truth, the Church possesses an unbroken chain of saints, an unbroken chain of theology, and an unbroken chain of tradition that promote nonviolence.

~ Jesus urged his disciples to love their enemies (Mt. 5:43-5), and told them that if they took up the sword, they would die by it (Mt. 36:51-2).

~ Paul wrote that Christians should bless their persecutors, not seek revenge, and give food and drink to their enemies (Rom. 12:14, 17-21).

~ Up until the time of the Christian emperors of the Roman empire in the 4th century, the Church's great saints and theologians opposed war and military service, including St. Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and Origen.

~ St. Augustine, considered the father of the Church's just war theory, believed that those who killed in a spirit of love could fight justifiably. He was suspicious of political figures, but did allow that the wars they fought, under certain circumstances, could be just. However, he taught that killing in self-defense--as opposed to defense of another--was always immoral.

~ St. Paulinus of Nola, a friend of Augustine, urged his friends to leave the military, saying that if they "fought" for Christ (by leading holy lives) they would receive Christ, but if they fought for Caesar they would receive damnation.

~ In the early Middle Ages, *Penitentials* (manuals outlining the kinds of penances required for certain sins) regularly prescribed heavy penances for those who had killed, even in just wars. It was a common practice that those who had killed in war be forbidden from ever killing again.

~ St. Francis of Assisi's Third Order, established for lay people wishing to advance in holiness, forbade its members from bearing arms or fighting.

~ St. Thomas Aquinas argued that clergy should never fight, in war or otherwise, because shed-

ding blood always made one "irregular," that is, unfit for carrying out priestly duties.

~ Erasmus of Rotterdam, one of the leading Catholic thinkers during the Reformation, consistently opposed war, referring to it as a "monstrous pursuit" that was more suited to beasts than to human beings. He described war as "utterly detestable to Christ."

~ Benedict XV, pope during World War I, became known as the "Peace Pope" because of his staunch opposition to the war and tireless efforts to bring the conflict to an end. He wrote that in war, "the rich are made poor, the poor are made destitute, and all are made to mourn."

~ Blessed John XXIII wrote an important work for Catholic nonviolence, *Pacem in terris* (*Peace On Earth*). In it, he suggested that, due to the destructive potential of nuclear weapons, war had become an unsuitable method of defense.

~ In *Gaudium et spes*, the Fathers of Vatican II called on all countries to recognize the rights of conscientious objectors to refuse war.

~ Pope John Paul II was a frequent critic of war, saying that it was always a "defeat for humanity." In his encyclical *Centesimus annus*, he wrote that war "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."

~ Pope Benedict XVI chose to be named Benedict after Benedict XV, wishing to continue that pope's work for world peace. While still a cardinal, Benedict stated that now may be the time to reconsider whether modern wars can ever be just.