

Why Be Concerned About a Military Draft? a Guide for Catholic Dioceses

“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.’ It is not enough, however, simply to declare that a Catholic can be a conscientious objector (CO) or a selective conscientious objector (SCO). 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” – USCCB, *Declaration on Conscientious Objection and Selective Conscientious Objection*

Is a Draft Likely?

All eighteen-year-old males in the U.S. are currently required to register with the Selective Service System (SSS), which automatically classifies them as 1-A, “available for unrestricted military service.”

Although the return of a draft is unlikely, it continues to be a possibility as long as draft registration continues. Voices such as that of U.S. Representative Charles Rangel (D-NY) have been calling for the return of the Draft as a fairer way to find troops for war. Many have proposed drafting females as well.

How Today's Draft Would Differ from the Vietnam Draft

If there were to be a Draft today, it would work differently than it did in Vietnam: Draftees would receive an induction notice to report for a physical in as little as 10 days after receiving the notice. If draftees want to file for an exemption or re-classification (such as CO), they need to be ready to indicate this almost immediately. Draftees should be ready soon after this to present their entire case.

If a draftee waits until after induction to attempt to prove they are a conscientious objector to war, it will appear that they are motivated by fear rather than conscience. Thus, it is VITAL that young people begin early by starting a “CO file.” If they are drafted, and are able to present a file that they have been working on for a couple of years, they will have a much easier time proving their case. A CO file could save their lives.

A CO file should be kept with a reputable organization. If the young person is a Catholic, the CO file should be kept with his/her parish or diocese.

What to Include in a CO File

1) A Statement of Conscience

In this statement, draftees must explain:

- a) Why they are opposed to all war (or to unjust wars)
- b) That their beliefs are sincerely held and rooted in religious, ethical, or moral beliefs;
- c) How they acquired their beliefs

- d) Evidence their beliefs are exemplified in their lives.
- 2) Letters of support from teachers, clergy, family, peers, testifying to the sincerity of their beliefs
- 3) Documentation that the young person is active and involved in peace and justice activities, such as pictures from a peace rally, a letter from a soup kitchen where s/he volunteers, or a paper written for a class about the horrors of war.

What Dioceses Can Do

Through parishes, schools, and youth groups, encourage young people to write at least a statement of conscience and send it to the appropriate office in the diocese (to be determined by each diocese.) That office should send a letter acknowledging the receipt of the letter on such and such a day, notarize the letter to provide evidence of the date of receipt, and file the statement as the start of that individual's CO File. The Diocese should indicate in their letter of receipt that they are willing to send a letter on the person's behalf to a draft board should the individual one day be drafted. They should also indicate a willingness to accept more materials, such as letters of support or documentation of peace activities, to add to the file in the future.

Why Statements of Conscience are still Important....

Even if there is no Draft

Our Church carries a 2,000 year-old teaching about war and conscience. Today, young people are bombarded with messages about war from the "left" and from the "right." It is crucial that they learn the rich tradition of their faith and develop their conscience to be able to discern where they stand on important moral issues. Writing a statement of conscience, whether it reflects a completely pacifist position or it asserts an opposition to using nuclear weapons during an otherwise just war, will help young people clarify for themselves some of these issues, or at least help them begin the hard work of grappling with Catholic teaching in the world.

How the Catholic Peace Fellowship (CPF) Can Help

CPF has created helpful packets for dioceses to keep on hand and send to youth. The packets include information on Church teaching on Nonviolence, Just War, Conscientious Objection, as well as form letters for statements of conscience and instructions on how to file these statements. For more information, and to order a packet, contact:

Catholic Peace Fellowship
P.O. Box 4232
South Bend, IN 46634
(574) 232-2295
www.catholicpeacefellowship.org
staff@catholicpeacefellowship.org