

# War, Peace and Conscientious Objectors

By FR. KEVIN O'ROURKE, OP

During World War II, and the Korean War, many Catholics proudly served their country in the armed services. In spite of the burden of leaving home and career, in spite of the dangers to life, very few American Catholics were conscientious objectors.

Today, however, the situation has changed. Many young Catholics refuse to serve in the armed forces. Thousands declare that their conscience will not allow them to take an active part in the Vietnam War, or in any other war.

Is the change of attitude among Catholics due to a change in the teaching of the Church about war? Is the Catholic now free to say that he will not serve his country?

Since the time of the Apostles, the Church has valued and cherished the spirit of non-violence based on the teaching of Christ. In the early Church, many Christians refused to serve in the armed forces. Christians always tried to emphasize the importance of love and peace, but the right to self defense was never denied.

Non-violent means of settling

disputes and defending oneself have always been preferred by earnest Christians, but the use of physical force to defend oneself, or one's community has been allowed as a last resort.

In an effort to specify when armed defense of the community is justified, Catholic theologians developed the "just war" theory. According to this teaching, initiated by St. Augustine and further refined by St. Thomas and Francis de Vittoria, a war, or armed conflict between nations is justified only if the war is declared as a last resort by a lawful authority, for a just cause, using just means, with reasonable hope of success. Moreover, the armed conflict is unjust if it produces a greater evil than it seeks to correct.

Applying these principles to war, to police actions, or any form of contemporary armed conflict is sometimes very difficult. To fight in a particular war can be a proper and legal decision for a Christian, and to refuse to fight in a particular war can be a proper moral, legal decision for a Christian.

In World War II, most Christians were convinced we were in a "just war." Today, Chris-

tians of good will often disagree. The person who sincerely tries to form his conscience concerning the war in Vietnam, must judge whether or not the goal achieved by the war is worth the death and destruction. He must decide whether the same goals might be obtained through other means, such as economic pressure; he must decide whether communism, or more accurately, economic imperialism, is really a threat to world freedom.

Truly, the decision is difficult. The evidence may be strong for one position, but it is not so strong that it leads to general agreement as it did in World War II.

No matter which position one finally holds concerning the war in Vietnam, or any war for that matter, it is important to admit the right of other people to disagree, and still remain Christian. Thus, when I teach a decision that the war in Vietnam is unjust, I must realize

that I could be wrong, and that others have a right to pursue a contrary path if it is justified by Christian principle. While I can and must try to persuade others of my opinion, I must not impose it upon other people, and above all I must not challenge their Christian sincerity.

A decision to be a conscientious objector does not see war, serve one's country. Such a decision simply limits the way one will serve his country. Indeed, it might be prompted by a great love of one's country and it might improve the moral element of the country. Conscientious objectors do not see war, or particular wars, as being just means for settling conflicts or defending rights.

"A Catholic, viewing his tradition and the message of the Gospel, could validly question and abstain from participation in war or the preparation for war," declared the American Bishops through the U.S. Cath-

olic Conference. Moreover, the Second Vatican Council endorsed laws that would "make humane 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."

Certainly, the world has had enough of war. As Pope John stated, "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."

The long range Christian plan is clear; we must work to abolish war, to demean and denounce it as a form of national policy. Should war become absolutely necessary as a means of defense, however, Christians may enter actively into the war, provided they can make a decision of conscience that the defense of the country justifies the death and destruction that will result.

## Decisions, Decisions

By FR. CARL J. PFEIFER, SJ

A friend of mine, like thousands of young men in the same situation, was about to be drafted. He agonized over his decision. The law of the land was calling him to participate in the Vietnam war; the law of his conscience called him to refuse to take part in what he judged an unjust and immoral war.

He was not opposed to war in general, but to "this" war. He knew Vatican Council II and the American Bishops recognized his right to abstain from participation in war.

He also knew that his decision would have serious consequences now and in his future. One thing is clear: he must make a choice and live with the consequences. And his is just one of the many kinds of weighty decisions Christians must make today.

Religious educators are concerned that the kind of moral education or conscience formation provided the young will realistically prepare them to make responsible decisions.

A Christian approach to making responsible decisions necessarily takes into account human values at stake together with the wisdom acquired from man's experience. Data for decision-making must also draw from the living tradition of the Church. As Vatican II suggests and repeatedly exemplifies, Christian decisions imply serious response to human values weighed in the light of the Gospel.

The young Christian has a right to a type of moral education that provides accurate and complete facts, nurtures attitudes of understanding, respect and compassion, and enables growth in the process of assessing human values in the light of the Gospel. This process involves three skills: reflection, dialogue, and prayer.

### Reflection

The Christian needs to be able to think, to reflect on his experience and on the meaning of the Church's tradition.

Educators have the task not so much of providing answers, as of challenging their learners to probe and question responsibly. "What is the meaning of peace?" "What are the effects of war?" "What is the value of human life?" "What realistic alternatives to war exist?" "What do existing laws say about the draft?" Great educators from Socrates down to the present day have encouraged growth in their students by guiding them to ask the right questions and then pursue them seriously.

The probing engages the young also in serious reflection on the Church tradition. It is not enough to simply quote Scripture or a document of Pope or Bishop. "What does the Gospel say about war and peace?" "What does Jesus mean when he says that 'whoever lives by the sword dies by the sword' (Mt. 26: 53) yet that he came 'not to bring peace but the sword' (Mt 10:34)? "What have Christians in the past and present judged about participation in war?"

### Dialogue

Reflection is encouraged, guided, challenged by dialogue with others. Young Christians need to be able to honestly discuss the type of questions just considered. They need to be able to listen to others who are also engaged in coming to responsible decisions in the same matter. The need for responsible dialogue is not just a recent insight of the social sciences but rests on St. Paul's teaching that all Christians are given gifts by the Spirit for the benefit of the whole community (1 Cor 12: 1-30).

Paul realized no one person or group possesses all the wisdom of the Holy Spirit. He understood that the Spirit provided the community with a variety of gifts necessary for the fuller growth of all. His insight is even more valid today. In the complex, pluralistic world in

which we live, Christians vitally need to learn to dialogue if sound, responsible decisions are to be made. Discussion, then, is not a teaching method in religious education, but a needed skill for responsible decision making.

### Prayer

Any Christian decision that hopes to express a true Christian judgment must rest on prayer. Prayer, not merely saying prayers, but prayer that flows out of one's experience and those of others facing similar decisions.

Christian prayer needs to arise out of life, while being nourished on the Church's prayer (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, 10-13). The example of Jesus is a concrete indication of the traditional awareness of Christians that serious decisions require prayer. It is just this type of prayer that young Christians need to learn if they are to make responsible Christian decisions.

Once a person has seriously reflected, dialogued, and prayed about the human values and the Christian wisdom bearing on his decision, he needs to decide, to choose. His responsible decision in conscience must be respected by himself and others. Religious education has the responsibility of helping Christians make and live by responsible choices.

## Q. and A.

by FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

**Q** The Vatican has just released a new rite for the consecration of virgins. I agree with the secretary of the Congregation for Religious who is quoted as saying that the rite will attract few lay women, but that it might be spiritually useful for older nuns who may want to rededicate their lives in this fashion. What I cannot understand is the remark attributed to another Roman figure who stated: "The Church has been consistent in teaching that virginity is a higher calling than matrimony. She does so today and will continue to do so—because it is a higher calling." I can't buy that argument at all. Furthermore, I thought we were done with that kind of theology.

**A.** The Council of Trent did, indeed, teach that virginity and celibacy are states of great religious value.

In its decree, however, Trent does not say explicitly that virginity is superior to marriage in every instance. It seems instead to be interested primarily in refuting those who tended to demean the celibate life and who tried to argue that marriage is always preferable to virginity.

In any case, the attitude that virginity is intrinsically superior to marriage reflects an unhealthy and, it seems to me, an un-Christian idea of human sexuality. Such an attitude is at odds with the rich and positive teaching of the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.

For those who are called to the state of virginity as a special sign of the Kingdom of God, virginity is superior to marriage—for them. But most men and women are called to the state of matrimony, and, for them, marriage is superior to virginity.

## KNOW YOUR FAITH



### War or Peace

The call to arms has posed a serious personal decision for many young Catholics. Not a few have chosen to adopt a non-military life-style. (NC Photos)



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