Selective Conscientious Objection and Catholic Teaching
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For thousands of years, the question of when to go to war has been debated by philosophers, theologians, politicians and citizens of the world. Some people believe that they cannot participate in or support any wars or particular wars. “Conscientious objector” (CO) is the term for those whose consciences forbid their participation in any war. “Selective conscientious objector” (SCO) is the term for those whose convictions forbid their participation in a particular war or types of wars. SCOs might believe it is immoral to serve in a capacity where they would be responsible for developing or using nuclear weapons. Or they might decide they couldn’t morally participate in a particular war, such as one in which civilians or civil society were a major target.


Organizations:
Center on Conscience and War, 1830 Connecticut Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20009; 202/483-2220 or 800/379-2679; nisbco@nisbco.org; www.nisbco.org

Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors, 1515 Cherry Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102; 215/563-8787 or 630 20th Street, Oakland, CA 94612; 510/465-1617; info@objector.org; www.objector.org

GI Rights Hotline, 800/FYI-95GI; www.girights.org (nongovernmental resource for servicemembers encountering difficulties or wanting information about discharges)

Pax Christi USA is the national Catholic peace movement, committed to the gospel imperative of seeking peace through nonviolence. Pax Christi USA is a section of Pax Christi International.

Pax Christi USA, 532 West 8th Street, Erie, Pennsylvania, 16502; phone: 814/453-4955; fax: 814/452-4784; info@paxchristiusa.org; www.paxchristiusa.org

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begin asking hard questions. Many of these are similar to those the military uses to determine if someone is a CO: What beliefs guide your life? How do they contradict war? How and when did you acquire these beliefs? How do these beliefs influence your life? Document your answers in a file and include background materials, such as teachings from your church, letters from others, etc.

Upon examination of these questions, you should apply a “reality check.” Do the wars that you would participate in ever happen with today’s military technology? Perhaps you will discover upon examination that you actually are opposed to today’s wars in any form. If you are not, your choices become much more difficult. You should consult a trained counselor and lawyer. If in the military, you may want to explore other discharge options. Or, you may feel strongly enough to challenge the existing regulations. In the past, cases have succeeded in changing the legal definition of CO.

It is important to make the distinction that COs of all types reject war – violence on a mass scale. This does not necessarily mean that a person must reject any use of force (such as police or defense against a personal attack).

WHAT CAN I DO?

• Learn more about Catholic teaching on war, conscientious objection and conscientious objectors.

• Contact the Center on Conscience and War to learn about the legislative efforts to change the definition of CO and to gain legal protection for those following their consciences. (CO protection is currently a privilege granted by the military, not a legal requirement.)