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# Refusal to Volunteer for Military Service on the Basis of Conscience

Do you refuse on the basis of conscience to volunteer for the military? If you would like to proclaim your refusal publicly, we invite you to use our website. You may send us a letter expressing your conscientious objection, and we will periodically post or otherwise publicize it—to bear witness to your conscientious refusal, to encourage others to consider what conscience demands of them today and to promote awareness among other conscientious objectors that they are not alone.

## Conscientious Objection (CO)

Generally, conscientious objection (CO) is a sincere conviction, motivated by conscience, that forbids someone from participation in war. This objection may apply to all forms or to particular aspects of war.

The **Selective Service** defines a conscientious objector as “one who is opposed to serving in the armed forces and/or bearing arms on the grounds of moral or religious principles.”

Depending upon what you allow us to do with your letter, we may post it on our website entirely or in part or we may simply make a report on our website of its reception either using your name or anonymously.

Our website is linked to those of other organizations—such as the Catholic Peace Fellowship and Pax Christi USA—which also may enable you to post or publicize your witness letter. These other organizations may provide more information about conscience and war. They may even offer you verification of witness letters as important evidence to future draft boards of your conscientious and longstanding objection to war.

You may send your letter of refusal to us via postal service or email at:

### Center for Christian Nonviolence

167 Fairhill Drive

Wilmington, DE 19808-4312

302-598-3395

Website: [www.centerforchristiannonviolence.org](http://www.centerforchristiannonviolence.org)

Email: [jjcarmody@centerforchristiannonviolence.org](mailto:jjcarmody@centerforchristiannonviolence.org)

## Combat Roles

Your refusal to volunteer for the military may be for combat roles. Your conscience may forbid you to kill in war. You may find yourself unable for moral reasons to respond to a military draft for combat or even to a draft for a non-combat role.

## Non-Combat Roles

Or your conscientious refusal may be against volunteering for non-combat roles such as medic, psychologist or chaplain because you might see the unintended effects of these works of compassion as supportive of combat beyond what your conscience can tolerate.

## Psychologist

Psychologists and other similar professionals may wish to express refusal to offer their knowledge or skills in ways that directly support combat, such as allowing the military to use their knowledge of human behavior to design more effective weapons systems or to desensitize people for killing. You may wish to express refusal to volunteer your mental health services to help return traumatized combatants to kill. You may also declare your refusal to seek employment with groups such as the Central Intelligence Agency, because of their engagement in clandestine warfare or involvement in secret prisons, regime destabilization or torture. Your letter might also take into account recent ethical problems of psychology and national security, the militarization of psychology, the development of operational psychology and the Selective Service Health Care Personnel Delivery System, rendering clinical psychologists below 44 years of age vulnerable to conscription.

**Web address:** Society for the Study of Peace, Conflict, and Violence:  
Peace Psychology Division of the  
American Psychological Association—Division 48  
<http://www.peacepsych.org>

## Chaplain

To priests and ministers considering refusal on the basis of conscience to become military chaplains, we offer the example of Fr. George Zabelka, a Catholic chaplain with the U.S. Army Air Force, 509th Composite Group, who served as a priest for those who dropped the atomic bombs which destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945. After his military chaplaincy, Fr. Zabelka was granted the grace of deep conversion to repent of his complicity in those war crimes. He became a witness to peace and nonviolence and an anti-nuclear weapons advocate the rest of his life.

Fr. Zabelka clearly, and rightly, felt that the U.S. military made use of his ministry to support combat. The April 21, 1941 Technical Manual given Fr. Zabelka by the War Department entitled *The Chaplain* explicitly declared four purposes for the office of chaplain (pp. 6-7):

The first two declared purposes are **ministerial**:

- a. To provide the facilities for public religious worship to the military personnel.*
- b. To give spiritual ministrations, moral counsel, and religious guidance to those under military jurisdiction.*

However, the last two declared purposes clearly lend **combat support**:

- c. To be the exponent in the Military Establishment of the religious motive as an incentive to right thinking and right acting.*
- d. To promote character building in the United States Army by precept and example and thus add greater efficiency to those engaged in the military defense of the country.*

While there is hardly any open debate in the church about the combat support consequences of the role of military chaplain, some priests conscientiously object to taking on that role, silently expressing their objection simply by not volunteering for it. But their witness is invisible. And their witness may be lonely because they do not know who else objects to military chaplaincy in conscience. Public proclamation—such as on a website—can make this witness visible and inspiring.

### **You may also consider the statement of Bishop John Botean:**

*“All people enjoy the human right to refuse to kill or to cooperate in killing another human being. This means they have a right to claim themselves as conscientious objectors not only against participation in war as a combatant. They have a right also to proclaim themselves as conscientious objectors to non-combatant roles that support combat—such as logistical, medical and psychological roles. This right extends to priests and other ministers who see military chaplaincy in its current form as having the unintended consequence of combat support for unjust killing.”*

Thus we urge national and regional bishops conferences, such as the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops (USCCB), to receive testimony from psychologists and other expert witnesses on how the present form of military chaplaincy desensitizes to killing.

We also urge bishops and other religious leaders to design ways to minister to military personnel that do not even unintentionally support combat.

We finally urge Catholic bishops and those responsible for theological or ministry education, especially in seminaries and schools of ministry, to see to it that, when the just war tradition—based upon the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas—is presented in their schools, his teaching on the role of the priest in war is also included. In his *Summa Theologica*, St. Thomas holds that the role of the priest in war is not purely ministerial but also combat support. What is more, in his *Summa*, St. Thomas does not give the priest any role in an unjust war.

St. Thomas Aquinas systematized the Catholic position on just war in his *Summa Theologica*, Part II, Section II, Question 40—“Of War.” The first article of that question summarizes the conditions for a war to be just. These are widely taught in Catholic schools, including colleges and seminaries and schools of ministry. However, the second article is hardly ever taught, even to candidates for ordination—that is, to future military chaplains. That second article treats the role of the priest in war. And Thomas does not regard that role as purely ministerial. For while Thomas exempts the priest from combat, he does not exempt him from combat support.

*“Prelates and clerics may, by the authority of their superiors, take part in wars, not indeed by taking up arms themselves, but by affording spiritual help to those who fight justly, by exhorting and absolving them, and by other like spiritual helps...it is the duty of clerics to dispose and counsel other men to engage in just wars.”*

We may note that for St. Thomas the priest is exempt from combat; that the priest actively participates in war by a ministry that supports combat by encouragement and absolution; and that this support is for wars specified as “just.” We may also note that military psychology has learned how to use chaplains to justify and even encourage combat; that religion can sell particular wars to the public; and that the ministry of military chaplain may have serious and objectionable unintended consequences.

### **Links**

**Catholic Peace Fellowship:** [www.catholicpeacefellowship.org](http://www.catholicpeacefellowship.org)

**Pax Christi USA:** [www.paxchristiusa.org](http://www.paxchristiusa.org)