

by Rev. Charles C. Miltner, C.S.C.

You ask me to answer two questions: 1) What is the morality of the conscientious objector? and 2) How should he act in the event of conscription? In undertaking to do this, I shall simply try to set down in clear and orderly fashion the traditional and more or less common teaching of recognized moral theologians.

The problem is this: May war in itself, or only in a given set of circumstances, be regarded as an enterprise so morally reprehensible that individual citizens may feel bound in conscience to take no part in it? May we say that no war is justifiable? Or should we say that some wars are just and others unjust? In any event, what is the obligation in conscience of a citizen who has positive doubts about the justice of a war that has been declared?

Father Henry Davis, S.J. (Moral Theology, Vol. ii, p. 120) states the common Catholic view thus: "Soldiers who are conscripted, or those who joined before the war, may usually presume that their country is in the right; in doubt, they are bound to obey. If the war is manifestly unjust, a soldier may not lawfully inflict any damage on the enemy, though he may, of course, defend his life if the enemy attack him. Soldiers who freely join up after the war has begun, must satisfy themselves that the war is just." The restrictive term, "usually," makes exception for the case of a war that is manifestly unjust. As no one may conscientiously take part in the commission of an evidently unjust act, so no soldier may take an active part in an evidently unjust war. But when it is not clear that the war is unjust-- the vast majority of cases-- then soldiers must obey their commanders, for when one cannot be certain about the lawfulness of an action, he may safely, i.e. conscientiously, follow the decision of those in authority on the presumption that their judgment is grounded on better evidence than that which he himself possesses, and so amounts to a moral certitude. Secondly, one who voluntarily enlists after war has begun must satisfy himself that the cause is just, because "no one may lawfully cooperate with others in despoiling another of what he possesses unless he be certain that this other possesses it unjustly." The pivotal question obviously is how one may know that a given war is just or unjust.

The rule cited above presumes that war is not intrinsically unjust, but that some wars are just, some unjust. Beyond dispute this is the traditional teaching of Catholic theology, whatever may be said about the desirability of changing that teaching in view of the changed conditions of modern warfare. It has never condemned the profession of arms, nor held that the fighting of the soldier was in itself sinful. Among her canonized saints are found warriors like Jean d'Arc and Saint Louis, and pacifists, conscientious objectors, like Saints Martin of Tours and Maximilian. Our Lord Himself, though He condemned the Pharisees, the covetous rich and the money changers of the Temple, did not condemn military men, nor did He class them with the notorious and professional criminals. He healed the servant of the Centurion, and though He praised him for his faith, He did not reproach him for his profession. This is not in the least to say that the Church has favored warfare as a national policy. On the contrary, as history abundantly shows, she has ever raised her voice in condemnation of war as a means of settling controversies between nations. Her ideals have ever been the ideals of peace. Only, she has been realistic enough to recognize the fact that, given the limitations of human intelligence and human good will, the reluctance of nations to submit their disputes to institutions of legal adjudication when such existed or to set them up when none existed, war is sometimes unavoidable. Hence her theologians have taught that "war is permissible, just as self-defense is permissible, for it may be the only means of maintaining existence or rights or defending them, and every independent society has the right of defence against an unjust aggressor." But even so, just as no one may take the life of another in self-defense unless he observe certain well-defined conditions, so no nation may justly undertake war except it be ready to observe clearly defined conditions. What these conditions are and whether under the methods of modern warfare they may be properly observed, will be discussed in a later Bulletin.

PRAYERS: (Deceased) Leo Litznerski, Univ. carpenter; Ed Burke (Dorchester, Mass.); Mr. Michael J. Whelan, brother-in-law of Sr. Finian, C.S.C.; Thanksgiving in honor of RVM.