

C. W.'s Position

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: Excerpts from her testimony to Congress opposing conscription. Extensive quotes from Church sources and others who argue that conscription is against the natural right to free choice of work and personal liberty of action. (DDLW #363).

Monsignor Decries Conscription Whip
Bids Senate Call on Patriotism for Defense Volunteers

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(Testimony of [Rt. Rev.] G. Barry O'Toole, professor of philosophy in the Catholic University of America, before the Senate Military Affairs Committee.)

Gentlemen:

I come here not to speak for anyone, but to present a moral issue. If might makes right and moral considerations are negligible, then what I have to say is meaningless; if not, it is of paramount importance.

A year's service in the United States Army does not qualify me as an expert, but it clears me of the charge of being a theorist.

To be a soldier is a vocation and no vocation should be imposed by law; for it is a Christian principle that every man should be free in his choice of a state of life.

It is my sincere hope that instead of enacting a law of compulsory military training, the Federal Government will call upon the nation's youth to enlist of their own accord.

What youthful America will be summoned to defend is the democratic ideal.

Democracy, in American parlance, does not signify a form of government. If it means anything, it means a conception or philosophy of government founded in respect for the free will of the human individual. This God Himself respects, and it is not for any government to trample upon it.

Each human being is a PERSON, that is to say a free, self-determining agent, who is the originator of his own actions and therefore responsible for them.

In view of his personal dignity, he is not to be treated as a soulless tool nor to be kicked about like a football. He is God's own image, not the pawn of any State.

God expects of him virtuous actions, and actions performed under compulsion are not virtuous actions. Hence the coercive power of the Government ought to

be kept within such bounds as will leave ample room for free choice—for voluntary virtue.

A single soldier who serves his country out of whole-hearted devotion is worth a hundred military slaves driven to arms under the lash of necessity.

The defeatists who despair of democracy will tell you that it is futile to call for volunteers. If democracy is as bankrupt as all that, if the only way to save it is to impose patriotism by force, let those who believe as much “heil Hitler” and confess that he is right. But if we still have faith that freedom and democracy represent the better way, then in God’s name let us give them a fair trial before we concede the superiority of the totalitarian way.

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Following are excerpts from the direct testimony placed before the Senate Committee on Military Affairs by representatives of The Catholic Worker in supporting its stand against enactment of compulsory selective military training legislation:

We take our stand opposing conscription on the ground that in addition to imperiling man’s natural and sacred rights, it constitutes an “armed peace,” the fallacy of which has been pointed out by Pope Pius XI. He said in regard to it, “It is scarcely better than war itself, a condition which tends to exhaust national finances, to waste the flower of youth, to muddy and poison the very fountain heads of life, physical, intellectual and moral.”

Rev. E. Cahill, S.J., author of “The Framework of the Christian State,” says that conscription laws tend to override man’s personal rights. “Man’s natural right to free choice of work and to personal liberty of action are suspended, and other rights still more sacred are violated and endangered. Besides, owing to the immense power which the conscription laws put into the hands of a bureaucracy, one can easily understand how almost every human right of the individual citizen is imperilled.”

Bishop John Duffy, of Buffalo, said: “Just as soon as a million men are under arms in the United States, at that moment does America become a totalitarian state and no power of democracy can change it. Let us bring back God, not imitate the foreign program of blood.”

Monsignor Barry O’Toole, of the Catholic University in Washington, in one of a series of eight articles in The Catholic Worker began his articles by stating, “Universal conscription, that is, compulsory enrollment of the able-bodied men in a nation, is one of the disastrous brood of evils spawned by the French Revolution.”

Real League of Nations

We urge Catholics not to lose sight of universal international disarmament as something to be worked for in setting up a real league of nations. Remember the words of Cardinal Gasparri, who wrote in 1917, "For the Holy See, the only system which is practical and which further could be applied easily with a little good will on both sides, would be the following: to suppress, by a common agreement, among civilized nations, compulsory military training."

We protest the use of national wealth in the mad race to increase armaments, the expenditure of billions when millions of our citizens are in need and hunger.

We pledge ourselves to oppose the passing of any conscription or "selective service" law.

We fear conscription is a direct threat for the economic control of South America by the armed might of the United States.

Peacetime conscription begat Napoleon, Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin.

We are praying God will save America from Conscription!

"As to whether the conscription laws of modern European states can be reconciled with men's inalienable rights the following may be said: These laws, in as far as they impose compulsory military service upon men of the state, are founded upon pagan precedent, and are abhorrent to the spirit of Christianity. The modern conscription laws (which date from the period of the French Revolution) and the political ideals that have given rise to them, are an outcome of the revolt against the church in the 16th Century and the subsequent spread of non-Christian philosophy in Europe. It is clear that these laws tend to override men's personal rights in matters of the highest importance. Man's natural right to free choice of work and to personal liberty of action are suspended, and other rights are still more sacred are violated and endangered. Besides, owing to the immense power which the conscription laws put into the hands of a bureaucracy, one can easily understand how almost every human right of the individual citizen is imperilled." – Rev. L. Cahill, S.J., *Framework of a Christian State.* " Page 318.