

If Conscription Comes For Women

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: Asserts she would not register for the draft because it is the first step toward war and answers common objections to her stance. Cites the Holy Father, Thoreau, and E. I. Watkin, founder of the PAX movement in England.

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I will not register for conscription, if conscription comes for women, nor will I make a statement to the government on registration day as to my stand, lest this be used as involuntary registration on my part. Instead, I publish my statement here, my declaration of purpose, and if it encourages other women not to register, I shall be glad at such increase in our numbers

Evil of Conscription

I shall not register because I believe modern war to be murder, incompatible with a religion of love. I shall not register because registration is the first step towards conscription, and I agree with Cardinal Gasparri, that the only way to do away with war is to do away with conscription.

“Nothing would sooner free the world from the scourge of war, the most deadly plague with which humanity is at present threatened,” wrote E.I. Watkins some years ago, “than the resolute refusal of a sufficient number to serve in the army. Even a small minority would prepare the way for the future refusal of large masses. All who are not willing to be conscripts from whatever motive, should unite in proclaiming this refusal.”

Family Prior to State

“The family,” Watkin continues, “is a society prior in value to the state, on whose natural right the state may not without usurpation encroach.” And it is as a most important part in that family, as a woman whose function it is to bring life into the world rather than to destroy life, that I make this protest.

“Conscription of women will not mean military service,” our readers may object.

“When necessary the state has the right to conscript labor, especially for works of mercy. Surely you would agree to feed people, to grow food for them, to nurse the sick, to drive an ambulance.”

First of all we question the need. Has all available labor been used when Negroes, one-tenth of our population, are discriminated against in industry? Why are

so many farmers being drafted for military service, why are Mennonites in conscientious objector camps when there is such need for farm workers, to raise food for the world?

State Enslavement

But in our blind move toward collectivism on the land, in our worship of the machine which ravages the land, taking all from it and putting nothing back, we are not being conscripted for farm labor. No, women are wanted to work in factories throughout the land to make the bombers, the torpedoes, the explosives, the tools of war.

And while the Holy Father pleads with us to keep the war out of the school room and the home, housewives are urged to save fat for explosives and school children are urged to buy bonds for bombers, and to bring scrap for shrapnel to disfigure, maim and kill their brothers in Christ, "but with love." And legislation to draft women moves on apace.

This is total war, and that means every man, woman and child, possessed, heart and mind, body and soul, by the state.

Abusing Scripture

But why object to registering? Why not register and then refuse if your number is called?"

By little and by little we must resist. Why take the first step if we do not intend to go on? Why count on exemption because of work of national importance and so lose the opportunity to testify to the truth that we feel so strongly?

"Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem to register." I have heard the specious argument. But it was not so that St. Joseph could be drafted into the Roman army, and so that the Blessed Mother could put the Holy Child into a day nursery and go to work in an ammunition plant.

"Render to Caesar the things which are Caesar's." Yes, and we have heard too much of that.

Let E.I. Watkin, founder of the Pax movement in England, author of *The Catholic Center*, *Men and Tendencies*, and *The Bow in the Clouds*, answer as he did in his pamphlet, "The Crime of Conscription."

"Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's. This is a favorite text with the hosts of Christian clerics, Protestant and Catholic, who both in the present and in the past, have abused and still abuse religion to enslave men's consciences

to the unjust bondages of a usurping state. They omit to notice the context. Our Lord has just asked for a coin, and having obtained the admission that it bears Caesar's image and superscription, bids his questioners render to Caesar what is his. This is obviously the coin payable in taxation which bears Caesar's stamp.

The Image of God

"The body and soul of man, however, do not bear Caesar's image. Whose image they do bear we are told in Holy Scripture. It is the image of God. Obviously, therefore, as we are to render to Caesar what bears his image, namely, money, we are to render to God, not to Caesar, what bears not Caesar's stamp, but God's; namely, human beings. Thus the same text which justifies, indeed, imposes the obligation of paying taxes, denies any right of the state to take a toll of man. All forced labor, for example, is implicitly declared unlawful. And still more does the principle here enunciated forbid military conscription. Whether a war be just or unjust, no government may without grave injustice compel me—bearing as I do the divine image which marks me as God's bondman, but a freeman in respect to my fellows—to slay and be slain in its quarrel unless I freely consent. If a government unlawfully outsteps its prerogative and imposes conscription, any one who, from whatever motive, refuses to serve, is whether he intend it or not, fighting for human dignity and freedom, as also is anyone who abets and supports his resistance."

Wisdom of Poverty

But now in these days it would be desirable to go even further, as did Thoreau, to refuse even the taxes which were to be used to pay for the means to kill our fellow man. In many cases, however, it is all but impossible to separate the tax from the cost of the commodity needed to maintain life. This necessity to be honest, however, forces us to the poverty Eric Gill speaks of in the excerpt from his autobiography which we reprint in this issue.

Lord God, teach us in this holy season, to seek the wisdom of poverty. Take away from us our hearts of stone and give us hearts of flesh so that we may grow in love for Thee and for our fellows. Amen.