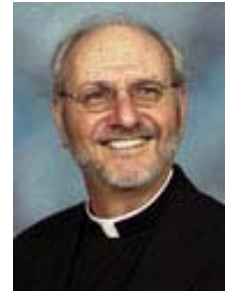


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Opt Out of War

When the Church beatified Franz Jagerstatter on October 26, 2007, it telegraphed an alternative message to a world too easily provoked to war. Political leaders can get it wrong. An individual's conscience, formed by an intense and prayerful study of the Gospel, remains the final arbiter of human action.

Jagerstatter, an Austrian farmer, refused induction into the German army during World War II, because he knew the war was unjust. No fewer than two priests and one bishop reminded him about his duty to his widowed mother, his wife and three small children, yet he refused military service. When the Nazis guillotined him in 1944, Franz Jagerstatter became the only layman in Germany executed as a conscientious objector.

Today, a growing number of U.S. military personnel are opting for CO status in light of the Iraq War. While the official number of formal applications for CO status remains low, 425 between 2002 to 2006, veterans opposing the war charge the actual number seeking CO status has been underreported due to the difficult application process and peer pressure. Still, military policy recognizes that the religious and moral beliefs of service personnel can evolve to a conscientious objection to war.

This Iraq War began under the darkest cloud of moral uncertainty. Recall that John Paul II had grave moral reservations from the start. At the time Cardinal Ratzinger, as quoted in *30Days* (April, 2003), summarized the pope's position saying, "Reasons sufficient for unleashing a war against Iraq did not exist." The Administration's paean about the world being safer without Saddam Hussein ignored the moral principle: "the ends do not justify the means." With no discovery of WMDs (weapons of mass destruction), the abuses at Abu Ghraib prison, the use of torture and the ignition of sectarian violence seemingly exacerbated by the U.S. occupation of Iraq, military personnel could easily have the needed epiphany to push

them to seek CO status.

The U.S. Catholic bishops this past November advocated a "responsible transition" out of Iraq. They rejected the polarizing caricatures of "stay the course" and "cut and run." They also counseled against establishing permanent military bases in Iraq, or controlling Iraqi oil resources. Bishop Skylstad, USCCB president said, "Our nation must now focus more on the ethics of exit than on the ethics of intervention."

The ethics of exit underscores the U.S. obligation to address the humanitarian crisis it helped create. To build the peace means to repair the damage. Currently, two million Iraqis have fled their country, including 40 percent of all professionals and 33 percent of all doctors. Another two million Iraqis are displaced within their country, allowing only 30 percent of Iraqi children to attend school last year.

On the home front, a relatively small percentage of the American people are assuming the greatest burdens of this war. With the number of U.S. soldiers killed approaching 4,000 and almost 30,000 wounded, many of the 160,000 U.S. troops are serving their second, third, or even fourth combat tours. The prolonged overseas tours of duty predictably are stressing marriages and increasing the incidents of post-traumatic stress disorder. Dealing with the destruction around them and the stress within them, soldiers must form their consciences about war.

Bishop Skylstad said, "Our nation must also make provisions for those who in conscience exercise their right to conscientious objection or selective conscientious objection."

At Sunday liturgy, people of faith frequently pray for the safety of our troops. Perhaps the petitions need to include those in the military suffering moral anguish who feel this war is wrong.

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The Catholic Conference of Kentucky (CCK) is an agency of the Catholic Bishops of Kentucky, established in 1968. It speaks for the Church in matters of public policy, serves as liaison to government and the legislature, and coordinates communications and activities between the church and secular agencies. There are 406,000 Catholics in the Commonwealth. The Bishops of the four dioceses of KY constitute CCK's Board of Directors.