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Statement on
Registration and
Conscription for
Military Service

Catholic Church

Administrative Board
United States
Catholic Conference

February 14, 1980

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We have followed closely the public debate on the reinstatement of registration for military service with the possible renewal of military conscription to follow. The questions of registration and conscription for military service are part of the broader political-moral issue of war and peace in the nuclear age. But registration and conscription bear so directly on the moral decision-making of citizens that they require specific attention.

The U.S. Catholic Conference (USCC), and its predecessor the National Catholic Welfare Conference (NCWC), have spoken to the question of peacetime military conscription five times since 1944. The present debate in Congress and the media raises both old and new questions; we offer in this statement a body of principles and a series of positions in response to the public debate.

We recognize, of course, that the questions of registration and conscription arise, as Vatican II said, because "war has not been rooted out of human affairs". In the face of the sad truth of this statement, our response as teachers in the Church must be the same as that of all the popes of this century. We call in season and out of season for the international community to turn from war and to do the works of peace. The primary obligation of the nuclear age is to banish resort to force from the daily affairs of nations and peoples. From Pius XII to John Paul II the cry of the Church and the prayer of all believers is a reiteration of the words of Paul VI: "No more

war, war never again.!' This must remain our primary response to war today.

Only in the context of this statement can we consider the question of what is the legitimate role of governments and the responsibilities of citizens regarding military conscription. We see registration, conscription and participation in military service as moral questions as well as political issues. Our perspective on these issues is shaped by Catholic moral teaching on the role of the state, and the rights and responsibilities of citizens, when both citizen and state are confronted by questions of war and peace.

With Vatican II we recognize that: "As long as the danger of war remains and there is no competent and sufficiently powerful authority at the international level, governments cannot be denied the right to legitimate defense once every means of peaceful settlement has been exhausted". This principle acknowledges the right of the state to call citizens to acts of "legitimate defense". To this right there corresponds the duty each citizen has to contribute to the common good of society, including, as an essential element, the defense of society. Both the right of the state and the responsibility of the citizen are governed by moral principles which seek to protect the welfare of society and to preserve inviolate the conscience of the citizen.

The moral right of the state to use force is severely limited both in terms of the reasons for which force is employed and the means to be used. While acknowledging the duty of the state to defend society and its correlative right to use force in certain circumstances, we also affirm the Catholic teaching that the state's decision to use force should always be morally scrutinized by citizens asked to support the decision or to participate in war. From the perspective of the citizen the moral scrutiny of every use of force can produce a posture of responsible participation in the government's decision, or conscientious objection to some *reasons* for using force, some *methods* of using force, or even some specific

branches of the service because of the missions they may be asked to perform. (Cf. *Human Life In Our Day*.)

In light of these general principles, we are led to the following specific positions:

1. *Registration*: We acknowledge the right of the state to register citizens, for the purpose of military conscription, both in peacetime and in times of national emergency. Therefore, we find no objection *in principle* to this action by the government. However, we believe it necessary to present convincing reasons for this at any particular time.

2. *Military Conscription*: We are opposed to any reinstatement of military conscription except in the case of a national defense emergency. We support the present standby draft system which requires the chief executive to obtain a new authorization to induct a specific number of men into the armed forces if clear purposes of adequate defense demand conscription.

3. *Conscientious Objection*: We regard this question in all its dimensions as a central element in Catholic teaching on the morality of war. First, we support the right of conscientious objection as a valid moral position, derived from the Gospel and Catholic teaching, and recognized as well in U.S. civil law. The legal protection provided conscientious objectors is a commendable part of our political system which must be preserved in any policy of conscription.

Secondly, we support the right of selective conscientious objection (SCO) as a moral conclusion which can be validly derived from the classical moral teaching of Just-War theory. The position of SCO has not yet found expression in our legal system, but a means should be found to give this legitimate moral position a secure legal status. The experience of the Vietnam war highlighted the moral and political significance of precisely this question. We are sure of the moral validity of SCO; we would

welcome a dialogue with legislators, lawyers, ethicists and other religious leaders about how to transpose this moral position into effective legal language.

4. *Universal National Service:* We continue to oppose, as we have in the past, a universal or national service corps; our opposition rests upon its compulsory character when a proportionate threat to the nation or need for it is not clearly evident.

5. *Women and Military Conscription:* one of the new questions in the public debate about registration and conscription is whether women should be registered and conscripted on the same basis as men. This is a complex question which touches several issues. It is our position that the past practice of making military service an option for women but not an obligation has served us well as a society. We do not see good reasons for changing this practice and so we oppose both the registration and the conscription of women.

6. *Methods of Registration:* While we acknowledge the right of the state to register citizens, we are disturbed by proposals to use methods of registration which would require schools to provide information for registration. Such direct access by public authorities to records for this sensitive moral issue could raise serious issues of church and state. We express our opposition to this method of registration; we support methods which do not directly involve the private or religious sector in the registration process.

In light of these principles and policy considerations there is a final point to be made directly to the community of the Church. The primary relationship of the Church to questions of war and peace is as a moral teacher. With Vatican II we affirm that: "All those who enter the military service in loyalty to their country should look upon themselves as the custodians of the security and freedom of their fellow countrymen: and when they carry

out their duty properly, they are contributing to the maintenance of peace". We also affirm that the decision to enter military service and subsequent decisions in the line of military duty involve moral questions of great importance. Hence, the issues of registration and conscription raise questions of the kind and quality of moral education that takes place in our educational system. Specifically, it raises the question of what educational and counseling resources are available to a person facing registration or conscription. In adopting this statement of public policy on registration and conscription we call upon schools and religious educators to include systematic formation of conscience on questions of war and peace in their curricula and we pledge the assistance of appropriate diocesan agencies in counseling any of those who face questions of military service.