



STATEMENT REGARDING
THE SECOND TRIENNIAL COLLECTION FOR
THE ARCHDIOCESE FOR THE MILITARY SERVICES
IN THE DIOCESE OF WHEELING-CHARLESTON

November 3, 2016

*“Put your sword back in its sheath,
for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.”
(Mt. 26:52)*

This weekend, several Catholic dioceses across the country will participate in the second triennial collection for the Archdiocese for the Military Services (AMS). This non-territorial diocese, founded in the 1985 by Pope John Paul II, provides pastoral services to members of the United States military stationed across the world. The Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston in West Virginia is one of several dioceses participating in this collection.¹ The West Virginia Chapter of the Catholic Committee of Appalachia has serious reservations about our diocese’s formal support of this collection.

Like all Catholics, Catholic soldiers have a variety of pastoral needs. The AMS is one way the church attempts to meet these needs. While some among our membership question the validity of military chaplaincy itself, all of us share a concern about the deeper messages communicated, intentionally or not, by the church’s support of the AMS collection. Namely, we believe that militarism in the United States is a problem that is getting worse, not better. Indeed, in our 2015 “People’s Pastoral” we identified a number of pervasive idolatries in the United States, including “the unquestioning, violent patriotism that works like a powerful religion to sanction and bless an economy of endless war.”² In that same letter, we noted that “Even our churches fall for these idolatries again and again,” and that “[w]hen this occurs, religion cooperates with injustice and loses its prophetic impulse.”³ One way our churches do this is by succumbing to our culture’s unquestioning support of the wars of the United States. At best, this takes the form of sentimental slogans of “support the troops.” At worst, Catholics even join the nation’s chorus of “my country right or wrong.”

Timed as it is the weekend before Veterans’ Day, we believe this collection intentionally seeks to capitalize on the emotions of the faithful and silences our church’s teachings on nonviolence and the dignity of all human life. The collection effectively provides material support for the military-industrial complex, and indeed our own church’s part in that system. And finally, the collection gives the impression that the church takes no issue with the recent military activity of the United States, most of which has been condemned by Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis. As followers of Jesus, we are deeply troubled by such visible cooperation with U.S. militarism on the part of our church.

Secondly, as Catholics in West Virginia, our Diocese’s support of this collection is troubling as we have seen for decades the way that poor and marginalized people in Appalachian communities are targeted for military

¹ See https://docs.google.com/document/d/16_KTx2gAu-dtrK3tz2Y7WvhWM9FucUT6V8flzy2AbSM/edit?usp=sharing.

² Catholic Committee of Appalachia, *The Telling Takes Us Home: Taking Our Place in the Stories that Shape Us* (Spencer, WV: CCA, 2015), 30, available at <http://www.ccappal.org/thetellingtakesushome2015.pdf>.

³ *Ibid.*

service due to a lack of employment and educational opportunities.⁴ Our diocese's support for this collection normalizes these recruitment patterns which prey upon the poor and ensure what Pope Francis has called an ongoing "world war in installments."⁵

We agree with the view of a recent Vatican conference sponsored by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and Pax Christi International, which boldly stated,

We believe that there is no "just war." Too often the "just war theory" has been used to endorse rather than prevent or limit war. Suggesting that a "just war" is possible also undermines the moral imperative to develop tools and capacities for nonviolent transformation of conflict. [...] We propose that the Catholic Church develop and consider shifting to a Just Peace approach based on Gospel nonviolence.⁶

We believe the Diocese's support of this collection undermines this commitment to Gospel nonviolence. Therefore, we ask:

- 1. That Bishop Michael Bransfield withdraw the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston's support for the collection for the AMS;*
- 2. That pastors, priests, and other pastoral leaders throughout the Diocese refuse to implement this second collection in our churches; and*
- 3. That the faithful refuse to contribute to the collection and instead redirect their resources to church groups or secular organizations working for justice and peace. In particular, we encourage supporting groups who a) provide direct service to economically vulnerable, such as Catholic Charities, soup kitchens, and Catholic Worker houses; b) work for economic justice, especially in the Appalachian region; and c) raise a voice for peace, such as Catholic Peace Fellowship and Pax Christi USA. (You might consider placing [this form](#) in the collection basket to peacefully offer your dissent.)*

Catholics would do well to remember that November 11 is not only Veterans' Day, but also the feast of St. Martin of Tours, a patron saint of conscientious objectors, who told his superiors in the Roman army, "I am a soldier of Christ, and it is not lawful for me to fight." We pray for all those affected by the wars of the United States, including U.S. soldiers, and we pray that in word and action we may become more and more a church of peacemakers, following the Lord Jesus who told his disciples to put their swords away.

⁴ See, e.g., Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2005), 28.

⁵ Pope Francis, "Address of Pope Francis to the Participants in the World Meeting of Popular Movements" (October 28, 2014), available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/october/documents/papa-francesco_20141028_incontro-mondiale-movimenti-popolari.html.

⁶ "An Appeal to the Catholic Church to Re-Commit to the Centrality of Gospel Nonviolence" (Rome, April 11-13, 2016), available at <http://www.paxchristi.net/sites/default/files/documents/appeal-to-catholic-church-to-recommit-to-nonviolence.pdf>.