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The check is definitely not in the mail

Colman McCarthy | Dec. 10, 2010

Archbishop Timothy P. Broglio (CNS/Bob Roller)

COLUMN

Dear Archbishop Timothy Broglio:

I?m not sure who supplied my name and address to you, but I did receive your letter asking for money for the U.S. Archdiocese for Military Services, which you head.

?Yes,? you wrote, ?faithful, patriotic and generous Catholics like you help make it possible for chaplain priests to be there for our troops serving in harm?s way. ... Donors like you are the sole means of financial support for the archdiocese.?

I certainly understand that times are tough for Catholic chaplains. As you say, only 275 are currently on duty, down from 400 since the October 2001 invasion of Afghanistan. Catholics are 25 percent of the military, while only 8 percent of military chaplains are priests.

Sorry, Archbishop, a check is definitely not in the mail. As honored as I am to be called ?faithful, patriotic and generous,? which is a stretch even in my best moments, you put the touch on the wrong person. Just to be clear, I?m neither anticlerical nor anti-soldier. I?m anti-military solutions. I see no evidence that wars stop wars, that killing ends killing or that soldiers who attend Mass and receive Communion before going into battle are less violent to enemy troops, whether the death-dealing is by bombs from planes or bullets from guns.

That 25 percent of the nation?s 1.4 million active-duty soldiers are Catholics who allowed themselves to be trained to solve the nation?s conflicts with bullets, bombs and belligerence strikes me as a raw indictment of the church?s leadership. No one has ever rationally explained to me how modern popes routinely condemn war -- ?No more war! No more war!? cried Pope Paul VI in 1965 at the United Nations -- yet never warn Catholics it is sinful to be warriors in the way it is sinful to engage in artificial birth control or have abortions.

Imagine if they did. Imagine if Catholicism were a true peace church, in the manner of Quakers, Mennonites, Church of the Brethren and Bruderhofs. With hundreds of thousands fewer soldiers to obey orders to kill, would

Congress be so quick to fund the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that began and remain unwarranted, unaffordable and unwinnable? Wouldn?t it be likely that with the military depleted of its 350,000 Catholics, the nation?s leaders would be forced to find nonviolent solutions to America?s ceaseless conflicts?

Instead of money -- or a ?love offering,? as the TV evangelists say -- I?ll be sending you a gift of greater value: a copy of We Who Dared Say No to War: American Antiwar Writing From 1812 to Now, edited by Murray Polner and Thomas E. Woods Jr. and published by Basic Books.

I suggest you turn first to Page 78 to read ?Do Not Serve as a Chaplain.? It?s a letter written Aug. 22, 1861, by peace activist Alfred H. Love urging a friend not to serve the Union Army as a chaplain. Love wrote: ?A religion that needs the defense of the sword is not holy, nor worth defending. The moment it demands such protection, it ceases to be acceptable to our Father, who taught a religion in the example of his beloved Son, of meekness with firmness, submission with persuasion, martyrdom with resurrection.?

Love was a merchant who refused as a matter of conscience to sell goods to the Union Army. His stance against war profiteering caused his company to go under, after suffering what a biographer called a ?great pecuniary loss.?

Aside from my pacifist leanings, I have another reason not to send you money. I read your June 1 statement urging Congress not to repeal the Armed Forces? current ?Don?t ask, don?t tell? policy regarding gay and lesbian soldiers: ?A change might have a negative effect on the role of the chaplain not only in the pulpit but also in the classroom, in the barracks and in the office.?

Should you ever reverse your views and advise Catholics not to join the military, or leave it if they are already in, and if you cease discriminating against gay and lesbian soldiers, I?ll immediately send a check. A whopper. Guaranteed.

[Colman McCarthy directs the Center for Teaching Peace in Washington and teaches courses on nonviolence at four universities and two high schools.]

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