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Editorial: Questioning our assent to militarism

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Editorial

Joshua Casteel was a young man of deep and serious intent who found himself confronting two conflicting realities in 2004: his role as a soldier and interrogator at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and his growing conviction the Gospel that was increasingly capturing his heart and his imagination told him the war and occupation were unjust.

Casteel was just 32 when he died of cancer in 2012, but he left behind a legacy of struggling with huge and demanding questions that would have filled several ordinary lifetimes. As a 2009 NCR profile described him, he had traveled the distance "from conservative evangelical to ardent Roman Catholic" and "from West Point appointee to crusading pacifist."

His life remains significant today because of the compelling questions it raises for Christians living in the most militarized country on earth and especially for those within a church that maintains the apparatus for a military archdiocese. That Archdiocese for the Military Services is now asking U.S. Catholics to support it through a national collection. The questions are raised anew, starkly, in the provocative essay by Mark Scibilia-Carver [1]. While we would have reservations about some of Scibilia-Carver's conclusions, he is profoundly correct to place the appeal for money for the military archdiocese directly next to the words of three popes of recent years, all of whom unqualifiedly condemn state violence and even question whether a "just war" is possible in this era. The most recent declaration is from Pope Francis: "There can be no religious justification of violence in whatever way it manifests itself."

Long overdue in the American church is a reasoned and deep discussion of U.S. militarism, the proper use of force, the state's responsibility to protect and defend, and the role of people of faith in all of this. To this point, Catholic teaching has had little effect in distinguishing us from any other segment of society when it comes to participation in wars and militarism.

In 2012, the United States spent more on its military -- $682 billion -- than the next 10 countries -- China, Russia, United Kingdom, Japan, France, Saudi Arabia, India, Germany, Italy and Brazil -- combined. We are trying to extricate ourselves from the second of two wars that have cost our treasury -- quite apart from the annual defense budget expenditures -- more than $2 trillion already. According to a study by Harvard Kennedy School Professor Linda Bilmes, the total cost of those two wars, when considering the long-term costs of providing medical care for the thousands of injured veterans, will exceed $4 trillion.

All of that far outstrips what the U.S. pays annually on entitlements. The defense budget itself is more expensive in a given year than any other single budget item, save for Social Security. And yet the military gets a relatively free pass when talk turns to budget cutting and deficit trimming.

Does a greater threat exist to religious liberty, family life, adherence to the heart of the Gospel than to allow the state and its military recruiters unfettered and unchallenged access to our children? Would we, without question, hand over lists of those in our schools to any other institution knowing that if the recruiters are successful, the

children will ultimately be schooled in the ways of violence?

Yet our bishops have nothing to say.

The collection for the military archdiocese brings the glorification of militarism into the sanctuary. It asks U.S. Catholics to give assent to militarism to a degree that is breathtaking for a Christian denomination. We hope bishops resist the idea of flyovers or singing the national anthem at Mass. No one is suggesting that Catholics anywhere should go without spiritual guidance and support. We are strongly suggesting, however, that Catholics need to challenge the church's unquestioning compliance with the pervasive demands of U.S. militarism.

A stubborn, persistent strain runs through Catholic history, highlighted in figures such as St. Ignatius of Loyola and St. Francis of Assisi -- whose lives gain new prominence today in the papacy of Francis -- of conversion from war to the ways of the nonviolent Christ. Along with heroic military chaplains, the church has also sent on the path to sainthood the Austrian farmer Franz Jägerstätter, who refused to join the German war effort in World War II because he found it unjust and incompatible with his understanding of the Christian Gospel. Those examples show, certainly, that the church can honor consciences variously formed and exercised.

But what kind of formation are we providing our young in this era of weapons of unimaginable destruction, in this age of drones and borderless wars, where assassination missions are carried out via robot within sovereign nations with whom we are not at war?

One of the more tragic elements in Casteel's journey from warrior to pacifist was his failure to find a Catholic chaplain with whom he could discuss his growing reluctance to participate in war. He said he found commanding officers more sympathetic to his point of view and more willing to smooth the way to conscientious objector status than he encountered in any of the priests he consulted. Who would hesitate to hold up Casteel as possessing, in that scenario, the most compelling understanding of the Gospel?

Shouldn't young Catholics, instead of hearing rousing support for the military from their pulpits and parish bulletins, be told that the nonviolent Christ and his command to love enemies might pose an obstacle to a military career?

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