

April 10, 1967

Dear Eileen:

Thanks for sending me the memoranda you have prepared for the U.S. Bishops. I hope they will feel concern at the fact that the Draft Law is unfair to Catholic Conscientious Objectors. On the other hand I wonder if some of them do not still feel there should not be any such thing as a Catholic Conscientious Objector. It is probable that men like Cardinal Spellman honestly think the Catholic should let his government make his decisions for him, and that the Bishops should simply urge the faithful to obey the Government. A pretty awful situation. Should they sometime be brought to consider the fact that this is not so good? Spellman defended freedom of conscience as regards religious belief but I wonder if he thinks it should be guaranteed in this matter also. I doubt it.

To be practical: I think the U.S. Bishops would be much more inclined to favor the idea of a law that would draft people for some kind of service and enable them to choose various forms, whether military, or peace corps, or something else. I think the Bishops would in effect accept conscientious objection in this more or less disguised form and would even encourage such a law heartily. Whether that would in fact be the best solution is another matter.

Since in fact the Draft Boards apply the law somewhat differently in each case, some easily allowing exemption to Catholics and others not at all, it would certainly be of great help if the Bishops could officially state that a Catholic is permitted to be a Conscientious Objector. But I suppose that is too much to expect of them.

These are details. It does seem to me that the basic problem lies in the nationalism of the Bishops and their abject fear of seeming to be unpatriotic, so that they do not have the courage to come out and oppose something as obviously monstrous as the Viet Nam war. What can be done to educate them? If they will not listen to the Pope, there is not much chance of them listening to people like us.

I wonder too if the Bishops might not simply be inclined to accept some alternative to the draft, the abolition of the draft law in favor of straight enlistment: a lot of right wing people seem to favor this, hence it would seem likely to appeal to the Bishops also.

Today is the opening of the meeting. I shall at least keep all this in my prayers and will await further news from you. With warm good wishes and in union of prayer, and hope,

In the Risen Christ

P.S. I am beginning personally to change my view about burning draft cards. Before I was completely opposed. Now I wonder if this kind of forceful protest is not fully justified: though I still think it only irritates the people we need to educate.