

## On the Line for Peace

May 2003

### Christians in the army?

Certainly, since the time of Jesus, many people who have committed their lives to him have taken part in armies. Some have refused to kill, or taken medical (or other "non-combatant") roles. Sometimes they've seen it as their duty to do whatever the government ordered, or they have seen it as the only or best way to fight evil.

There is also a strong tradition, however, based on Jesus' life and words, of Christians who have decided they couldn't be part of the military. These are the stories we will tell in the next two columns.

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We have record of some of **Jesus' sayings and actions**, which specifically forbid hurting others:

"God blesses those people who make peace. They will be called God's children!" (Matt. 5:9 CEV)

"Love your enemies, and be good to everyone who hates you....If you love only someone who loves you, will God praise you for that?" (Lk. 6:27, 32 CEV)

"Put your sword away. Anyone who lives by fighting will die by fighting." (Matt. 26:52 CEV)

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**Evidence up until about 200 A.D.** (inscriptions on soldier's tombstones, etc.) shows hardly any involvement by Christians in the military. Earliest Christian written statements support this:

"Do not avenge yourself on those who injure you...let us imitate the Lord, who when he was reviled, reviled not again." (Ignatius of Antioch, 110 A.D.)

"We who formerly used to murder one another do not only now refrain from making war upon our enemies, but also ...die willingly confessing Christ." (Justin Martyr of Greece, 153 A.D.)

"We [Christians] cannot endure even to see a man put to death, though justly." (Athenagoras, 180 A.D.)

"We are come, agreeably to the counsels of Jesus, to '... convert into pruning hooks the spears formerly employed in war.' For we no longer take up 'sword against nation.'" (Origen, from Egypt and Palestine, app. 180 A.D.)

"The soldier who is of inferior rank shall not kill anyone. If ordered to, he shall not carry out the order, nor shall he take the oath. If he does not accept this, let him be dismissed. The believers who wish to become soldiers shall be dismissed, because they have despised God." (Hippolytus' *Apostolic Tradition*, likely teaching of the church at Rome app. 200 A.D.)

"If a soldier or one in authority wishes to be baptized in the Lord, let them cease from military service or from the post of authority. And if not, let them not be received." (*Testament of Our Lord*, from Syria, app. 220 A.D.)

**Church documents (from 200 to the 400's A.D. in Rome, Syria, and Egypt) make clear:**

- Anyone who was a Christian or in a class for baptism was forbidden to join the army.
- Anyone in the army who became a Christian could if necessary remain, but only if he didn't take part in war or murder.
- Anyone in responsibility in the army must give up his position if he wanted to become a Christian.

Then how did the church grow to become supportive of kings and rulers and their armies? Where did the Crusades come from, that were specifically promoted as "Christian wars" by rulers and popes alike? Stay tuned for more history in the On the Line for Peace, July 2003 column.....

### **Peacemakers of Long Ago: Maximilian** (app. 300 A.D., in Africa)

When he was the age to enlist, Maximilian, told those in charge, "I am not allowed to be a soldier, for I am a Christian." Later he refused the royal badge that had the sign of the emperor on it, saying, "I do not accept your mark, for I already have the sign of Christ, my God...I do not accept the mark of this age, and if you impose it on me, I shall break it, for it is worth nothing." The consul said, "You must serve or die." Maximilian replied, "I am not a soldier of the world but of God. It is Christ whom we serve, all of us who are Christians." The consul said, "In the guard of honor of our lords there are Christian soldiers and they serve." Maximilian answered, "They themselves know what is proper for them. But as for me, I am a Christian and I cannot do evil." The consul asked, "Those who serve, what evil do they do?" Maximilian replied, "You know very well what they do."

Maximilian was executed soon after. Later, as a special honor, his body was brought to Carthage and buried near the tomb of Cyprian, a great leader in the church, who had also died as a martyr.

**Marcellus** (298 A.D., in Tangier, Morocco)

After throwing down his soldier's belt in front of the legionary standards which were there at the time, he bore witness in a loud voice: 'I am a soldier of Jesus Christ, the eternal king. From now I cease to serve your emperors and I despise the worship of your gods of wood and stone, for they are deaf and dumb images!' Marcellus was then brought before the tribunal, where he revealed that this was the second occasion on which he had made his convictions known. The governor Fortunatus sent the accused to his superior, Agricolanus, at Tangier.

Agricolanus: You served in the army as a common centurion?

Marcellus: I was a soldier.

Agricolanus: What madness has driven you to reject the military oaths and to speak as you have done?

Marcellus: There is no madness in those who fear God.

Agricolanus: You have thrown away your weapons?

Marcellus: I have thrown them away. For it is not fitting that a Christian, who fights for Christ his Lord, should be a soldier according to the brutalities of the world.

Marcellus was also killed for his acting on his beliefs.

**Resources:**

*Peace Be With You* by Cornelia Lehn, 1980, "I Cannot Do Evil: Maximilianus." (interesting biographies for 6 year olds and older)

*How Christians Made Peace with War: Early Christian Understandings of War* by John Driver, 1988. (90 p. book for 9 year olds and older)

*It Is Not Lawful for Me to Fight: Early Christian Attitudes Toward War, Violence, and the State* by Jean-Michel Hornus, 1980. (for adults)