

43. Can a Christian be in the military?

Neither the Bible nor the Church gives a final answer to this question, so it is up to your individual conscience.

John the Baptist, the last Old Testament prophet, who pointed out Jesus as the Messiah, told the soldiers who came to him for advice: “Don’t take money from anyone by force or accuse anyone falsely. Be content with your pay” (Lk 3:14), but he did not tell them to leave the army. On the other hand, Jesus warned that “all who take the sword will die by the sword” (Mt 26:52).

The Catholic Church’s teachings on war say that there is such a thing as a just war, and the military is an honorable profession if it serves justice. A just war is essentially a war that is (1) defensive rather than offensive, and (2) necessary to prevent a greater evil. But the Church also teaches that pacifism, the refusal to use violence for national defense, is also an honorable option for a Catholic (Rom 12:17–21). There were many Christian pacifists in the early Church.

If you enter the military, it should be for the right motive: for peace (Mt 5:9). That is the only reason that justifies the existence of the military, for wars are justly fought only to make peace. Wars are for the sake of ending wars. War is a horrible, barbaric practice. Pope Paul VI called out to the world, like a prophet, to outlaw all war forever. If you go into the military, it should be with this motive: to help *end* war and to risk your life, if necessary, to save innocent lives.