

## **Christianity and Military Service**

- **What Loyalty or Obedience Is Owed to the State?**
- **What Civic Duties Are Binding upon Christians?**

Early Christian teaching emphasized the value of non-retaliation (cf. Mt. 26:52 "Put away your sword, for he who takes the sword will perish by the sword" and the rejection of Christians suing one another in lawcourts). Marcion, who rejected the association of retribution and violence with the good God, would seem to have developed this theme.

At the same time, early Christians loved military metaphors and transferred them over to the realm of spiritual warfare, e.g. describing the division of families by individual reception/rejection of the Gospel with the paradoxical words, "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Mt. 10:34).

Paul is especially fond of military metaphors (following the Old Testament prophets), just as he is fond of metaphors relating to athletic training; for Paul's most extended military metaphor, see Eph. 6:10-18 and for his description of himself and his co-workers as soldiers in the service of Christ, see Philem. 2; Phil. 2:25; 1 Cor. 9:7. Paul makes this spiritualization of military images clearest in his description of the spiritual work of the Christian leader in 2 Cor. 10:3-6 and 2 Tim. 2:3.

Christian writers of the second and third centuries continued this trend by describing the Christian as a soldier of Christ, who in baptism, swears an oath (*sacramentum*) of obedience to the one who commands them, accepting the Cross as their banner and standard and standing at the station where Christ has placed them, unwearied by the burden (*sarcina*=a military pack) he must bear.

Holy war in the Old Testament (e.g. Numbers and Joshua) could be interpreted allegorically as pointing to the Christian's unsparing war against the disordered desires that tempt one.

All these images were extended during the Church's period of persecution, when the opponent became the punitive power of the Roman state and martyrdom the faithful act of defiance.

Although it is clear that Christians did in fact serve in the army during this period (inscriptions exist, plus Christian soldiers in Marcus Aurelius' army are said to have prayed for rain during the battle with the Quadi; Tertullian *De coron.* 1 and *Apol.* 42 [*militamus*]; Dionysius of Alexandria in Eusebius *H.E.* 6.41.22-23).

Nonetheless, it would certainly have been difficult to avoid events that involved the veneration of the patron deity and the genius of the emperor and related sacrifices, prayers and rites (Tertullian *De coron.* 11; *De pall.* 5).

To receive baptism, however, might involve penance for past bloodshed.