The Writings of Bishop John Joseph O'Connor and the Great War

By Alan Delozier, Executive Director

The rationale and ideals behind American entry into World War I were the result of retaliation and national self-interest. This was also a time when the country went on the defensive to protect democracy and its right of free movement in the world. Further, the immediate threat of warfare was coupled with ethical and religious questions of right and wrong, in a more philosophical sense. Europe was the focal point of trench warfare, aerial battles, and naval engagements, which resulted in this continent’s having suffered the worst of this fighting which lasted from 1914-18. The main combatants, France, Germany, and Italy, which each possessed a long-standing Catholic presence, and the spiritual and confessional underpinnings of these nations, influenced the interpretation of the bloodshed and the sociopolitical changes afoot.

The combatants on either side, whether Axis Powers or Triple Entente, tended to call this a battle of national borders, but all parties maintained higher ideals and were curious as to whether God was on their side. With the American Expeditionary Forces joining the fray in 1917, those in this predominantly Christian nation were waging a moral crusade along with the aforementioned practical self-interest of keeping the US safe from harm. America was no different from other countries as a fervently Protestant nation: the Catholic minority was seen and attempted to make their presence as patriots known even though in many cases these soldiers, sailors, and marines would be fighting alongside or against their relatives, countrymen, and others on the European front. Not only did Catholics in the service and chaplains representing their Church have an interest in the outcome of the Great War but so did the Bishops who were part of the spiritual force under the direction of the Pontiff. Popes Pius X and Benedict XV had to perform a careful balancing act: the faithful existed in large numbers, and oftentimes as a majority force among the belligerent countries, and the popes had to avoid alienating any of them for fear of showing any favoritism that would risk alienating secular leaders in the process. This was no easy task when, for example, the Italian hierarchy emphatically supported the war and made patriotic pronouncements, causing the Catholic Italians to rally to the flag. American President Woodrow Wilson, former Governor of New Jersey, declared that peace was impossible, saw the proposals as no more than a return to prewar arrangements without tackling the situation that had led to fighting, and thus declared war on the enemy.

In terms of treatment from a socio-religious perspective within American borders, Catholics were not looked down on as a faith group per se, but those of German and Italian extraction were often seen as suspect even if their families had been here for generations, or at least this was a perception. In partial response, the National Catholic War Council (NCWC, later to be known as the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops) was founded in 1917 by a contingent of Catholic clergy. Delegates from various dioceses and religious communities worked together to form this organization. Mainly advisory and voluntary, it was an organization that could help with fostering more positive interaction with the secular world. Part of the motivation for this was organizing and preaching to first- and second-generation immigrants who often came from European nations now in combat and who might be perceived as enemies of their new country in some quarters, but showing patriotism and allegiance to the star-spangled banner and the cross became their inspiration. Part of the aim and mission of the NCWC from the start was advocacy on behalf of Catholic interests from all levels along with education, social action, and serving as a liaison with the government. During World War I, the unity of purpose between church and state was especially important in the effort to win the war. The hierarchy
communicated with priests and the faithful through meetings and public pronouncements, especially during the war years.

Within New Jersey and most particularly the Diocese of Newark, John O’Connor (1855-1927), Bishop of this See, led the spiritual efforts in this highly diverse geographical area. The American hierarchy, including O’Connor, offered moral and other support to the combatants. When 1916 came and entry of the United States led to further direct involvement, military personnel from New Jersey counted among their numbers many who were parishioners at local parishes in the then Diocese of Newark. Local clergy served as military chaplains, and others remained in their respective parishes and observed the war from afar. Bishop O’Connor offered pastorals imploring prayers for peace and a resolution to hostilities at various times during this age of conflict. He wrote on August 19, 1914, the following missive:

"The disastrous war, now devastating some of the fairest countries of Europe, and the awful loss of life already incurred, not to speak of the consequences which its continuance will necessarily entail to the inhabitants of those unhappy lands, should prompt us, in accordance with the exhortation of Our Holy Father . . . to pray that in His goodness and mercy, He may bring this unhappy strife to an end. It is God alone who can touch the hearts of man with His grace and remove the unhappy causes which brought about this unexpected and disastrous conflict of the Nations. We are all children of the same Father to whom we pray every day that His will may be done on earth as it is in heaven’, and the charity of Jesus Christ, our Divine Redeemer, moves us to beg Our Heavenly Father to put an end to this terrible scourge of war and to restore peace and concord to His people. Kindly exhort the members of your congregation to pray earnestly in the privacy of their homes, and invite them to join with you in your church in public prayer for this intention. The Litany of the Saints or any other suitable form of prayer may be used for the purpose—and, until further notice, add to the prayers of the Mass the Collect ‘Pro Pace’ whenever the Rubrics of the Missal will permit its insertion."

Additional examples produced by Bishop O’Connor include instructions to the clergy and the faithful which follow the theme of encouraging peace. In this vein, there were many prayer services and hopes for world peace. During the course of World War I, further demonstrations of support including the work of the Knights of Columbus, victory gardens to compensate for food shortages, bond rallies, and "Liberty Loans" to help morale and build esprit de corps were found on the home front. Surviving documents written by Bishop O’Connor when the armistice came in 1918 and afterward offered a continuation of prayers, but also saw to the post-war transition for veterans and their families. Also included in the plan was the formation of a War Memorials Commission, and services for the deceased were offered as a means of honor and closure as the prayers for peace would remain for those within the Diocese of Newark and those throughout the world.

Portrait of Bishop O’Connor