

ON THE FRONT LINES IN “THE ARMY OF PEACE”:
THE LIFE AND WITNESS OF BEN SALMON TO A
CHURCH AND A WORLD AT WAR

by Michael Baxter

Ben Salmon was one of the four Catholic conscientious objectors during World War I. This article tells the story of his early commitment to justice for workers, his refusal to comply with conscription, and his arrest and incarceration in military prisons (part 1); contrasts Ben Salmon’s story with the typical Catholic support for the war (part 2); presents an exposition of his thought on the basis of a lengthy statement of conscience that he wrote just before his release from military custody in November 1920 (part 3); and then reflects on the significance of his witness and words for inaugurating a counter-tradition of a radical pacifism stance that has been taken up by later figures, such as Dorothy Day, Gordon Zahn, and Daniel Berrigan (part 4).

On June 5, 1917, Ben Salmon, a twenty-eight-year-old Catholic layman from Denver, Colorado, sent a letter to President Wilson stating that he would refuse conscription into the military. Earlier that day, he had registered for the draft even though he considered the government’s mandate to be illegitimate. But he would not be complying further. For more than six months, Salmon heard nothing back from the government. But on Christmas Day 1917, he received in the mail an Army questionnaire seeking his personal information for classification and conscription into the military. The next day, he hand-delivered a letter to his local draft board declaring his refusal to answer the questionnaire. After noting the irony of receiving the Army questionnaire on Christmas Day, he stated his reasons:

War is incompatible with my conception of Christianity. I positively refuse to aid organized murder, either directly or indirectly.

I must serve God first, and, in serving Him it [is] impossible to be other than loyal to my country—the world.

Ultimately, individuals and nations must awaken and rally to Christ's Standard or perish. Meantime, I must stand firm and trust in God.

Let those that believe in wholesale violation of the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" make a profession of their faith by joining the army of war. I am in the army of Peace, and in this army I intend to live and die.¹

For the next three years, from his arrest a few days after sending this letter until his release from military custody in November 1920, Salmon adhered to the principles he set forth in his letter and learned the cost of serving on the front lines in the Army of Peace.

The purpose of this essay is to recount the story of Ben Salmon's life and witness and to offer it as a record and testimony of how one man resisted the nationalism that overtook the United States during the Great War by embracing instead the peace of Christ that lies at the heart of the Catholic faith. This essay comes in four parts, in which I briefly retell Salmon's story (part 1); contrast Salmon's story with the mainstream Catholic response to the U.S. entry into the Great War (part 2); summarize Salmon's reasons for refusing to participate in the Great War on the basis of a statement he wrote toward the end of his incarceration in 1920 (part 3); and indicate how his life and thought was lifted up by Salmon's successors who likewise devoted their lives to serving in "the Army of Peace" (part 4). Looking back a century later, it is clear that this remarkable man embodied the principles and articulated the perspective of an alternative tradition to the Americanist tradition that dominated Catholic life and thought during his time, a radical Catholic counter-tradition. For my part, I simply want to recount the story, confident that Salmon's life and witness is at long last becoming the most credible and compelling paradigm of Catholic thought and action on war, conscience, and peacemaking in the United States.

1

Benjamin Joseph Salmon was born on October 15, 1888, in Denver, Colorado.² He was the third of four children of Irish-Canadian

immigrants, both Catholic. His father was not notably devout, but his mother took him to Mass on Sundays at Holy Family Catholic Church, enrolled him in Catholic schools, and (as Salmon’s children have testified) provided an example of faithfulness that influenced him in his youth. In his early teens, perhaps upon coming to know a veteran of the Spanish American War who his mother took into the home and nursed, Salmon began wondering how the Catholic Church could reconcile war with the command not to kill.³

In 1907, after graduating from high school, Ben, along with his brother Joe, began working for the Colorado and Southern Railroad. Over the next several years, his politics moved in a leftward—and here I mean Old Left—direction. Colorado in these years was the site of the “mining wars,” as they were called, fierce labor struggles in which strikers, strike breakers, hired guns, and lawmen alike were killed. Cripple Creek (1894), Leadville (1896), Telluride (1901), Cripple Creek, and Telluride again (1903–1904): these were the flashpoints in the great struggle for justice for workers.⁴ Shaped by this incendiary local history, Salmon came to view radical labor unions such as the Western Federation of Miners as the primary vehicle for social change. And he did not shy away from bringing his labor convictions to his own workplace, taking on the role of a labor “agitator” (his word).⁵

Also during these years, Salmon read Henry George’s *Progress and Poverty* and quickly took up the single-tax cause. George argued that economic injustice could be rectified by a steep land tax, compelling corporations and landowners, especially wealthy landlords, to sell off their large holdings, thereby enabling the working classes to own modest properties and provide for their families. It was a national movement of considerable political importance at the time. Salmon served as secretary of two organizations dedicated to the cause, the Colorado Single Tax Association and the Denver Single Tax Club, and he edited and published a small weekly paper called *Single Tax*.

Salmon’s commitments intensified when word came out in April 1914 that National Guardsmen had killed a dozen striking coal miners and thirteen women and children as they hid in a striker camp in Ludlow, Colorado. Like many around the country, Salmon was outraged. He stepped up his union activism and as a consequence lost his job. He wrote and distributed fliers during a single-tax referendum in Denver. When that effort failed, he ran for the Colorado state legislature on a single-tax platform. All these initiatives were part of his struggle for justice. But they were only a prelude to the struggle to come.⁶

When the Great War broke out in August 1914, Ben Salmon did not hesitate to make his views on the war known. He quickly published an antiwar article in his *Single Tax* newsletter entitled “Thou Shalt Not Kill.” The pamphlet created tension between Salmon and some of his fellow members in the Knights of Columbus chapter of his parish. Still, as the war wore on and the level of carnage increased, he became increasingly outspoken.

Like many Americans, Salmon voted for Wilson in 1916 as the presidential candidate who would keep the United States out of the war. Therefore, like many Americans, he was dismayed when Wilson, on April 2, 1917, five months after being elected, convened Congress to seek a declaration of war. Salmon scorned Wilson’s “change of colors,” as he put it, so it was no surprise when on June 5, the day all able-bodied young men were compelled by law to register for the draft, he wrote a letter of protest to the president. Not long after, he became the secretary of the Denver branch of the People’s Council of America for Democracy and Peace, an antiwar organization set up by leftist activists and intellectuals.⁷ He wrote more letters to the president and the press, delivered speeches on soap boxes, and distributed antiwar pamphlets, including one titled “Ours Is the Land of Tyranny and Injustice,” which was censored by the Postmaster General in the fall of 1917. Salmon thus earned a reputation as a radical activist, not only around Denver but nationally. On November 6, *The New York Times* described him as a “spy suspect,” probably on the basis of his letters to Wilson that the Postmaster had forwarded to the press. Then, he received the Christmas letter and questionnaire from the Army and wrote back declaring his refusal to cooperate with conscription. At this point, he was expelled from his parish’s chapter of the Knights of Columbus.⁸

Salmon’s fate during the year 1918 can be summarized as follows: On January 5, he was arrested and released on \$2500 bond, pending trial. A newspaper article reporting the episode described him as a “slacker,” the standard epithet for draft resisters at the time. On January 7, he sought legal assistance from the National Civil Liberties Bureau in New York City but he was turned down: “Supreme Court has held conscription constitutional,” the telegram advised. “No use fighting.” He fought anyway. In a trial held on March 30, 1918, his attorneys argued that the Army questionnaire was unconstitutional because it violated their client’s First Amendment right to free exercise of religion. They lost. Salmon was sentenced to nine months in the

Denver County Jail but was released on bail. While awaiting an appeal ruling, he received another draft notice instructing him to report for training on May 20. He refused. On that day, he was arrested by a municipal policeman and turned over to military authorities, who placed him in solitary confinement overnight at Fort Logan, Colorado (just outside Denver). From there, he was sent to Camp Funston, Kansas (May 22); to Camp Pawnee, Kansas (June 12); and to Camp Dodge, Iowa (July 2), where he was court-martialed for desertion and distributing propaganda and sentenced to death. The sentence was later reduced without explanation to twenty-five years hard labor. His final transfer was to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas (October 9). A month later, the Great War was over. But, as Finney writes, "Ben Salmon's prison sentence had just begun."⁹

Salmon's time at Leavenworth was harsh. Working as a commissary clerk, he discovered that food delivered to the prison was being sold to outsiders and the prisoners were being fed slop. He investigated and concluded that \$700 a day was missing and not accounted for. He refused to continue working in the commissary and organized the prisoners to protest against the misappropriation of funds. For this, he was placed in solitary confinement, in "the hole," a small, five-by-nine foot, damp, dark cell with no bed or blankets, no toilets, where only bread and water were served. He was held in "the hole" for six months. His health deteriorated. Even so, he refused an offer to be released in exchange for returning to work. In April 1919, he was released from the hole and placed with the other "absolutists." In late June 1919, this group was transferred to Fort Douglas, Utah, where conditions were equally harsh. For more than a year, Salmon persisted in protesting the harsh conditions and unfair and illegal treatment of conscientious objectors, writing letters to President Wilson, Secretary of War Baker, circuit judges, and lawyers at the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), seeking help with a writ of habeas corpus. On July 13, 1920, he began a hunger strike. Ten days later, near death, he sent for a priest, but the priest refused to hear his confession, give him communion, or anoint him, on grounds that his hunger strike was tantamount to suicide which is a mortal sin in the eyes of God and the church. The next day, two other priests did come. On July 25, he was force-fed. Then on July 31, he was transferred to Washington, D.C., and placed in a wing of St. Elizabeth's Catholic Hospital designated for the criminally insane.¹⁰

By this time, Salmon's case was taken up by the ACLU, which appealed to the War Department and contacted the press. In early August, a news story on Salmon appeared in *The New York Times*. His cause gained national attention. Prominent churchmen, including Msgr. John A. Ryan of Catholic University, agreed to help. In October, the ACLU supplied Salmon with a writ of habeas corpus. When it was turned down, he resolved to take his case to the Supreme Court. At this point, his cause won more attention. In mid November, he was moved to Walter Reed Hospital, where his mail was censored, his visitors were barred, and his right to use a phone was denied. After letters poured in, the War Department granted pardons to thirty-three conscientious objectors who remained in federal custody, including Salmon. On November 26, 1920, the day after Thanksgiving, he gathered his belongings, signed his release papers, received a Dishonorable Discharge, and walked out of military custody a free man.¹¹

2

Ben Salmon's witness during the Great War is striking in itself: his unswerving sense of justice, his steadfast commitment to peace, his deep faith in Christ, and his capacity to listen to the call of his conscience and follow that call wherever it led. But Salmon's story is even more striking when placed alongside the near unanimous support of Catholics in the United States for the war. Like the population at large, Catholics were not entirely convinced that the nation should enter into the European war when it started in 1914, but once the U.S. Congress declared war in 1917, Catholics—again, like the population at large—declared their allegiance to the nation and promised their energetic support of the war effort.

Nowhere was this support more clearly stated than in the letter sent by James Gibbons, Cardinal Archbishop of Baltimore and de facto head of the Catholic Church in the United States, to President Wilson. The letter was sent on April 18, 1917, twelve days after war was declared. On behalf of the fourteen Catholic archbishops in the United States, Gibbons assured the president:

We stand ready, we and all the flock committed to our keeping, to cooperate in every way possible with our President and our national government, to the end that the great and holy cause of liberty may triumph, and that our beloved country may emerge

from this hour of test stronger and nobler than ever. Our people, as ever, will rise as one man to serve the nation.

Not long after this letter was sent, in August 1917, a group of Catholic clergy and laity met in Washington, D.C., to make good on Cardinal Gibbons’ promise. The fruit of their meeting was the establishment of the National Catholic War Council. Its purpose was to mobilize the nation’s 17,000,000 Catholics to perform “war work,” as it was called at the time. The National Catholic War Council’s work included the following: recruiting priests to serve as military chaplains for Catholic soldiers and sailors, gathering religious supplies of all sorts (patens, chalices, hosts, vestments, sacramentaries, altars, candles, missals, devotional literature, and so on), building visitors’ centers near military bases stateside where family and friends could stay when visiting soldiers and sailors in training, erecting aid stations abroad where Catholic troops could partake of healthy and edifying forms of recreation, establishing war councils on the diocesan and parish levels to facilitate the support of troops by Catholics on the home front, founding Catholic chapters of the Boy Scouts of America, establishing Student Army Training Corp programs at Catholic colleges and universities to train students for military service after graduation, training social workers for postwar “relief work” overseas, tending to the graves overseas of fallen Catholic soldiers, and amassing a comprehensive documentary record of the war and relief work performed by Catholics during and after the Great War (which can still be found in the archives of the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C.).

All this, and more, is recorded in *American Catholics in the War: The National Catholic War Council, 1917–1921* by Michael Williams, a staff member of the Press Department of the War Council. The aim of the book, Williams explained, was to tell “the short story of how our American Catholics fought and worked for God and for country during the Great War, and in the days of reconstruction, under the direction of the National Catholic War Council.”¹² Published in 1921, this “short story” (which is 467 pages long) vividly conveys how and why Catholics in the United States gave their time and energy, in some cases their lives, in service to the nation during the Great War. The book shows that this was a service given out of a love for God and country, a dual love that had shaped the lives and work of Catholics in the United States in centuries past, indeed from the very beginning

of America, right up to the recent past of the Great War. Let us take each of these periods in turn.

In centuries past, Williams explains, Catholics played a central role in the history of the United States. First came Columbus and the Catholic missionaries from Spain; then, the Catholic missionaries accompanying the explorers and colonizers of France; and then, most importantly, the Catholics of the English colonies, one colony in particular, Maryland. Founded by Catholics, the colony of Maryland practiced religious toleration in government. The practice was codified in law with the Act of Toleration of 1649. This policy of religious toleration was soon suppressed under the British penal laws for more than a century, as Williams tells it, but it was restored with the founding of the nation. This is why Catholics contributed wholeheartedly to the growth and development of the nation and came to its defense in the Revolutionary War and in every war thereafter: the War of 1812, the Mexican War, the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, and the Great War. Williams' story includes a cast of characters personifying American Catholics' love of God and country: George and Cecilius Calvert, the cofounders of the colony of Maryland; Charles Carroll, signatory of the Declaration of Independence; his cousin John Carroll, first Archbishop of Baltimore; and, most importantly, Cardinal Gibbons, who served as a Union chaplain in the Civil War, attended the First Vatican Council, and convened the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore (1884) where he insisted that Catholic immigrants must set aside their ethnic identities and embrace their newly acquired status as Americans. Gibbons receives the central role in Williams' story, the clearest exemplar of love of God and country, setting him up to perform his key role as leader of American Catholics as support the nation in the war effort.¹³

This more recent phase in U.S. Catholic history begins with Catholics making good on Cardinal Gibbons' pledge to President Wilson.¹⁴ The immediate challenge was one of "management, of organization," Williams observes. This meant the church had to reshape itself into a unified body with a national identity and organizational structure. But the church was well equipped for this task, adapting its "two-thousand-year-old machinery" to meet the needs of a nation at war.¹⁵ The most important responsibility was to provide for the spiritual needs of the Catholics in the military, which would in turn make them better soldiers and sailors, for "unless a soldier keeps himself morally and spiritually fit he will be of no use to his country."¹⁶

Providing an opportunity for confessions emboldened soldiers to fulfill their duties with newfound vigor: “You can put me down for any kind of job out there,” one soldier exclaims, “I’m all cleaned and I don’t give a damn what happens now.”¹⁷ The belief here was that pastoral care enables soldiers to face the prospect of death more bravely and thus to perform more effectively in battle. “Only those unprepared to meet their God are cowards on the battle line,” one Catholic chaplain wrote. “We [Catholics] know no such thing, because our men are ever ready to answer the call of Him who holds sway over life and death.”¹⁸ The overall premise in the War Council’s work is clear: Catholic soldiers and sailors receive God’s help as they go to war.

The final chapter of *American Catholics in the War* announces that the National Catholic War Council will continue its service to the nation in the postwar period (he was writing in 1920) by infusing its public life with sound Christian principles so that it adheres to true principles of justice and peace. For this reason, Williams explains, the War Council has been reconstituted as the National Catholic Welfare Council, coordinating all dioceses, parishes, church institutes, and societies “to act like one organism, one living body, in that direct and positive Catholic action which the times demand.”¹⁹ Having fulfilled the wartime promise of Cardinal Gibbons to serve the nation, now the departments of the newly constituted Welfare Council—Education, Social Welfare, Press and Literature, Societies and Lay Activities—will enable American Catholics to continue to serve the nation in accord with their dual love and loyalty, expressed in the book’s final sentence, “*Pro Deo et Pro Patria!*”²⁰ This motto captures the presiding theme of *American Catholics in the War*: From the nation’s earliest origins and founding right up to the Great War, American Catholics have loyally served God and country, and they will continue to do so into the future.

Michael Williams’ history and the mentality it captures help us to understand what Ben Salmon faced when he took his stand against the war. Not only was he facing the repressive machinery of a nation-state at war, he was also facing the wrath of a church bent on demonstrating its love and loyalty to America in its time of national crisis. Indeed, he was bucking against the past record and future hopes of an Americanized form of Catholicism, a form in which the church harmonizes with and subordinates itself to the aims and purposes of the United States, becoming, in effect, a nationalized church. It was all but inevitable, therefore, that Salmon would endure the criticism and

rejection of his fellow Catholics, laity and clergy alike: being expelled from the Knights of Columbus at his home parish in Denver, denied access to the sacraments by priest-chaplains at Fort Douglas in Utah, neglected by church leaders while confined in a ward for the criminally insane, at least until he became a cause célèbre around the country (and perhaps an embarrassment to his church).²¹ In the face of such daunting opposition leveled by both church and state, Salmon's actions are worthy of admiration. But in addition to this, also worthy of admiration are Salmon's words, especially the words he wrote account for his conscientious objection to war that he composed while at St. Elizabeth's Catholic Hospital. To this remarkable text, we now turn.

3

Salmon started writing his statement on conscientious objection shortly after he arrived at St. Elizabeth's Hospital in early August 1920. It runs for 230 pages of typescript (single spaced, regular font) totaling about 130,000 words. He seems to have worked on it for several weeks, perhaps even a month or more. Toward the beginning, he says that he will organize his thoughts under three headings: the political, humanitarian, and religious grounds for his conscientious objection—the three headings used by military authorities to categorize various conscientious objectors imprisoned during and after the war.²² But the statement wanders for several reasons. His personal papers were never sent to him from Fort Douglas, as promised, so he was working from memory. He did not have the books he wanted, so he had to work without them or request them and wait until they arrived. And he thought things through as he wrote, drawing on personal experience, using analogies to make his points, clarifying his argument in relation to Catholic teaching, and repeatedly rebutting the notion that he suffered from “defective judgment” or was “insane.” Still, his writing is quite well organized, so his statement can be readily understood in terms of the headings he himself employs, the political, humanitarian, and religious grounds of his conscientious objection. Let us take of each of these in turn.

Salmon begins explaining his political grounds by quoting President Wilson to the effect that the Great War was “a commercial war, that the seed of war in the modern world is industrial and commercial rivalry.” If so, he asks, then who profits? Not “the soldier lads” who

were paid thirty dollars a month, but the "profiteers." In fact, he points out, "the World War produced 17,000 . . . new millionaires in America, in addition to enhancing the fortunes of those who were already millionaires and producing a large army of near millionaires."²³ Needless to say, he goes on to note, the newspapers depicted America's motives in joining the war as "noble, unselfish," "for the good of humanity," for "Democracy." But in fact, "humanity" did not fare so well. Great Britain got more than one million square miles of territory, whereas Ireland, Egypt, India, Persia, and other lands received "the yoke of serfdom." Ireland is a special concern for Salmon. After the Irish people voted for self-government, "England dispatched 200,000 troops to the Emerald Isle" along with "every implement of modern warfare" in order to "protect" the Irish from Democracy.²⁴ The government and the press also misrepresented the war "as a War to Crush Militarism." However, "the American Army is today approximately three times its pre-war size. In 1916, there were 4,000 officers feeding at the public crib, but there are now more than 15,000." A similar increase in militarism can be seen in France, England, and Japan; indeed, "every nation on earth with the exception of Germany is crushing militarism doubling, trebling, quadrupling their armaments."²⁵ The war was also, supposedly, "a war to make future wars impossible." But in fact, wars are being fought still: Greek and British troops are set against the Turks near Constantinople; British troops are operating in Mesopotamia; Arabs are fighting the French; Poland and Russia and friction between Russia and Austria—all instances indicating that militarism is far from being overcome.²⁶ Finally, Salmon turns to the experience of those who fought the war to drive home the point that the average soldiers on the front lines lived in misery while the officers lived in comfort as they conducted the war from afar.²⁷ "So," he writes, "from the political viewpoint, that is, looking at war from the standpoint of the great masses of people, there is but one conclusion: War is a good thing—for the profiteers and the military men of high rank."²⁸

After noting that the military is also employed against striking workers at home (he refers to a recent strike in Denver²⁹), Salmon moves on to his humanitarian reasons for opposing war. His humanitarian point is a simple one. He makes it by recalling a lecture on love of country delivered by a Father O'Ryan of Denver in which the priest explained the evolution of love of the family, to the tribe, to the village, the city, the state, and then the nation. At each stage, this evolution of

peace and harmony was extended “so that now we have a nation of people bound together by the ties of friendship and reciprocal interests that make for understanding and peace.”³⁰ But, Salmon observes,

For some reason, Father O’Ryan stopped when he reached national boundaries. Had he pursued the logic of his illustration, he would have encircled the globe with the philosophy of love. But Father O’Ryan is like so many of our priests and ministers, he seems unable or unwilling to look beyond the borders of the good old U.S.A., he is a “patriot.” And so it is with the leaders of Christianity in other countries.³¹

Noting how families, cities, and states “can get along without mobilizing armies to press their claims against each other,” he insists that “nations can do likewise” by means of international policing or other means short of mortal combat. He admits that this vision is idealistic, but so was the vision of “airplane faddists” when he was a child, and so are the visions of inventors and those who elevate humanity scientifically or artistically. Idealism is necessary for progress, yet too often, idealism is muted by propaganda and in some cases by censorship. The latter, he points out, was imposed on him in the fall of 1918, when he was evicted from the Cooper Building in downtown Denver for writing a pamphlet calling for a “conscription” of wealth (\$5000 per person) to pay for the war. The post office did not allow it to be mailed. Rather than deal with his dissenting position through reasoned argument, the authorities silenced his dissent through force. This is because the press is controlled by propaganda rather than by facts, the result being that an idealistic vision is ruled out. Salmon argues that this arbitrary limit can be broken only when we expand our vision beyond the boundaries of the nation-state to include all humanity.³²

The religious grounds for Salmon’s opposition to war are the most voluminous, taking up some 180 pages, about eighty percent of his statement. They can be divided into three types of arguments: (i) arguments from scripture, (ii) arguments against the just-war teaching of the Catholic Church, and (iii) arguments urging trust in Christ and His teaching.

The arguments from scripture are located almost entirely in the teachings of Jesus. “If you are a Christian,” Salmon writes (to the doctors examining his case) “listen to the voice of Christ echoed from the pages of the New Testament.”³³ While acknowledging that war was

sometimes permitted in the Old Testament, he insists that “we are Christians, and we must do what Christ said, and there is not one instance since the dawn of Christianity where Christians were ordered by God to go to war. On the contrary, all Christ’s teachings prohibit not only war but also its incident hatred, anger, etc.” Here he cites and comments on Matthew 5:21: “you have heard that it said of them of old: Thou shalt not kill. . . .”³⁴ He also quotes “Blessed are the merciful” (Mt 5:7), noting that “the victors are never merciful, for war is an agency of the devil and the devil’s philosophy is ‘Blessed are the unmerciful.’”³⁵ Jesus’ injunction in Mt 5:40, not to contend with one who takes your coat but to give him your cloak also, “does not sound much like the soldier’s philosophy.”³⁶ And Jesus’ injunction to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect (Mt 5:43–48) is “more proof as to what Christ’s rule of life really is.”³⁷ To the argument (made by an Army chaplain at Camp Funston) that these passages in the Sermon on the Mount were only “admonitions” of Jesus and not “commandments,” Salmon counters that “Jesus wanted us to live, not a part of His doctrine, but all of it.”³⁸ The one passage he cites repeatedly and most emphatically comes from St. Paul, “who was a militarist before his conversion to Christianity,” namely, Romans 12:18–21. Contrary to the apostle’s instructions never to render evil for evil, war “renders ‘evil for evil,’ does not ‘provide good things in the sight of men’ and seeks to avenge ourselves for wrongs done to us, whereas St. Paul reminds us that the Lord is the avenger of evil.” Finally, he notes, the concluding exhortation in this passage— “be not overcome by evil, but overcome evil by good”—is simply what we do in many ordinary affairs of life. We overcome lies with truth, sickness with health, anger with meekness, pride with humility. So the way to overcome the evil of war is by the good of peace, a steadfast refusal to “render evil for evil.”³⁹ Overcoming evil by doing good is, as Salmon sees it, “Christianity in a nut shell.”⁴⁰

This refusal to render evil for evil serves as the basis for Salmon’s arguments against just-war teaching. He makes his arguments by engaging with an article on “War” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* authored by Rev. Charles Macksey, S.J., Professor of Ethics and Natural Right at the Gregorian University in Rome.⁴¹ He copies the article in its entirety, more than ten pages of typescript, 479 lines in all, each numbered for easy referencing. Then, he methodically rebuts the article by invoking his fundamental principle that evil can only be overcome by doing good. This injunction and related ones in the Sermon

on the Mount pertain not only to individuals, Salmon insists, but also to nations. Otherwise, how could we make sense of Jesus' commission to the apostles to go forth and baptize all nations?⁴² Moreover, he argues, the state must recede in cases when its laws conflict with divine law:

Man is anterior to the state. Since God has forbidden him to kill, the State cannot confer the right to kill, and therefore the power to order its citizens to slaughter their fellow men is not vested with the State. God alone can issue such an order. Either Christ is a liar or war is never necessary, and, very properly assuming that Christ told the truth, it follows that the State is without [he is quoting Macksey here] "judicial authority to determine when war is necessary" because it is never necessary.⁴³

Time and again, as in the above passage, Salmon overturns Macksey's philosophical categories by recasting them theologically. "Natural law" is defined in terms of the law of nature whose author is God.⁴⁴ The "natural tribunal" of the state is supplanted by the "supernatural tribunal."⁴⁵ "Justice" is the freedom to act toward one's final end, that is, knowing, loving, and worshipping God (this is Macksey's definition), but then, Salmon points out that this in no way entails slaying others. Likewise, "self-preservation," which is a duty of the natural law, does not mean doing so with force but rather "with spiritual and intellectual weapons."⁴⁶ On this score, "the weapons of the Almighty are more powerful to prevent foreign aggression than bullets."⁴⁷ The chief point, the one Salmon returns to repeatedly, is that Christ is the Son of God and that all terms and categories must align with this fundamental doctrinal truth—including all terms and categories pertaining to the matter of "just" killing. This will be the only way to prevent the misuse of just-war reasoning, for, as Salmon writes, rather facetiously, all nations go to war for "just" reasons, all nations wage "just" wars.⁴⁸ In other words, the notion of a just war invites self-deception, as would the notions of "just stealing," "just adultery," or "just intoxication."⁴⁹ The same goes for the justified killing through the death penalty, another state-sanctioned violation of the teachings of Christ.⁵⁰ Killing, while it is imposed to stem the tide of evil, actually results in the opposite, for whenever we kill, especially in the mass killing that is war, "satan's dominion is extended. All thru the ages the bodies of millions [have been] ground in the grist of

Mars, but the evil itself is unsubdued, for it cannot be subdued except by the work of the spirit which overcomes evil with good.”⁵¹

This brings up the third argument within Salmon’s “religious grounds” for his conscientious objection, namely, that it requires a profound trust in Christ and His teachings, a trust in divine providence. For Salmon, trusting in divine providence is the pivotal choice for a Christian. He puts the matter bluntly. The president calls for deploying money and might to prosecute the war, whereas Christ rejects the eye-for-an-eye approach and urges us not to resist evil and to turn the other cheek. “Whose policy should we adopt, Wilson’s or Christ’s?” Both spoke in the interests of humanity, “the only difference” being “that Christ spoke with divine wisdom, while Wilson uttered the finite fallacy of humankind.”⁵² In other words, Wilson relied on the worldly logic of resisting evil with evil rather than the Christian logic of overcoming evil with good. The former logic never works. Evil begets evil, wars beget more wars. The latter approach does work but trust is required because its ultimate vindication emerges only in light of the words of Christ. For this reason, Salmon places us—and with us, all history—in the context of the final consummation described in Matthew 24:

After warning us that we shall hear of wars and rumors of wars, and of nation rising against nation, Christ makes it clear that He does not wish that we should take part in these wars, for he pleads, “See that ye be not troubled. For these things must come to pass.” . . .

After relating the many miseries that would befall mankind, of pestilence and famine, of earthquakes and affliction, of scandals and betrayals, of hatred and seductions, of abounding iniquity and charity grown cold, the good Master assures us: “But he that shall persevere to the end, he shall be saved.”

Just as He calmed the waters on the treacherous sea and saved the lives of His disciples as we learn in the eighth chapter of Matthew, so will He quell the treachery that storms about the Christian on the sea of life.⁵³

Had Christians trusted Christ, Salmon writes, the Great War would never have occurred, for “if Christians would read the bible and govern their lives accordingly, War would be impossible. Christ’s

teachings save us from delusions,” and Germany, France, England, Russia, and the other warring nations all fell prey to delusion—the delusion of prewar preparedness, of quick victory, of postwar peace.⁵⁴ As it happened, Christians turned away from Christ and placed their trust in their national leaders to the benefit of the profiteers.

On this score, Salmon picks apart and criticizes several devotional texts, including an *Army and Navy Edition of the New Testament* with a foreword by Cardinal Gibbons and a book titled *Maxims of Cardinal Gibbons*, both distributed by the National Catholic War Council.⁵⁵ Salmon is respectful toward Cardinal Gibbons, yet at the same time, his criticisms are pointed. Commenting on parts of Gibbons’ Foreword line by line (as he did with Macksey’s war article), Salmon reconceives key themes—Christ’s example, carrying out one’s duty, respect for authority, alleviating sorrow—in a more scripturally shaped manner.⁵⁶ He does much the same with Gibbons’ *Maxims*, aiming especially at the notion that we must obey all authority as put in place by God. Here he notes, wryly, that this means Ireland must obey British authority, not a very popular idea among Irish-American Catholics.⁵⁷ He even takes to task the eight-point motto and the symbol of the War Council. At one point, not holding back, he charges that “the activities of The National Catholic War Council helped to cause the greasing of many thousands of bayonets with the crimson blood of those whom Christ would have bathed in the healing waters of kindness and mercy and love.”⁵⁸ At another point, he expresses exasperation by returning to the core principle of his moral theology: “Evil cannot be conquered by Good for the simple reason that the devil cannot withstand God; this is Greek to the Agnostic, but it ought to be understood by the clergy and laity composing The N.C.W.C.”⁵⁹

To his credit, Salmon is asking of his coreligionists nothing more than he asked of himself. Trusting God is what led him to be a conscientious objector, even when seemed to be irresponsible or reckless. He explains his decision poignantly. He admits that his wife is alone with their children, making it seem that he is not performing his duties as a husband and father, but he is praying for his family and he must trust that this is enough, that God will provide.⁶⁰ So too when it comes to his brother Joe. While attempting to visit him at Fort Leavenworth, Joe got caught in the snow, came down with pneumonia, and died. Does that prove I was wrong to be incarcerated? Salmon asks. Not at all, he answers, because “he died a holy, happy, peaceful death” with his family at his side and with the benefit of the sacraments.⁶¹ Here, we see

Salmon interpreting the events of his own life in terms of the principle of overcoming evil with good, a principle that is given validity, ultimately, in the light of eternity. He makes this same point by reflecting on the story in the Book of Daniel in which the Israelites “had perfect faith in God, were delivered by Him from the designs of their enemies, and the example they set converted the king.” He writes:

There are fiery furnaces today, into which Christians are cast and will be cast if they follow God in place of militarism; while the flames of the fiery furnaces of today are different than those that Sidrach, Misach, and Abdenago were subjected to, the suffering is keen nevertheless. But, if you have faith, there is nothing that you will be unable to endure. True, we may lose our lives if we are loyal to God, but we are not certain to live on in disloyalty. I would rather be one of the C.O’s. who died in the stand for genuine Christianity than to be wearing a breast full of medals for service rendered [to] the devil on fields of battle. Our bodies, medals, knowledge of military achievements, will pass away, but the soul lives on forever, and the eternity of the soul is an eternity of misery or an eternity of happiness according to the revelations of holy writ.⁶²

More can be said about Ben Salmon’s remarkable statement of conscience, but this brief summary is enough to convey the gist of his political, humanitarian, and religious reasons for taking his stand, as well as his intellectual acumen, personal integrity, and genuine piety. Writing this statement after having endured more than two years in prison seems to have given him the opportunity, at long last, to defend himself against the accusations of “defective judgment” and “insanity”—all for refusing to participate in a war that (as his statement makes clear) left millions dead, millions more wounded, hundreds of thousands orphaned, while resulting in more military armaments, more “profiteers” profiting from them, and more wars looming on the horizon in the years to come.

4

At his release in November 1920, Ben Salmon’s story was on the front pages of major newspapers around the country. For a while, he remained in Washington, D.C., and worked under the auspices of the

ACLU, assisting in the effort to obtain the release of Eugene Debs, the Socialist labor leader who had been in prison since June 1918 (and who was eventually released by President Harding in 1921). Salmon refrained from returning home, owing to the vociferous threats against “Denver’s notorious slacker.” Moreover, he and his wife had become somewhat estranged. So he moved to Chicago and worked for a while for the American Freedom Foundation, an affiliate of the ACLU. Later, in 1922, he was joined by his wife, Elizabeth, and their son Charles. A second child was soon born, Margaret, then a third, Geraldine, and a fourth, Michael, who died in childhood. Salmon eventually took a job at the Lindbergh Airport in Chicago—the best he could do with a dishonorable discharge from the Army. When the Depression hit in 1929, the family’s economic difficulties worsened. He suffered numerous ailments owing to hardships during his time in prison and his hunger strike. Late in 1931, he contracted pneumonia and never recovered. He died at home on February 15, 1932.⁶³ By this time, his notoriety had faded from national prominence.

But Ben Salmon’s story lived on in the hearts and minds, books and memoirs, of antiwar activists and scholars. Norman Thomas, in his book *The Conscientious Objector in America*, an account of the plight of conscientious objectors during the Great War, noted that Salmon’s hunger strike was “the most dramatic event of the last months of the imprisonment of the objectors” and that his legal efforts led to the release of that last remaining group.⁶⁴ Ammon Hennacy, in his autobiography *The Book of Ammon*, recalled telling a group of Catholic Workers in Chicago (this was in 1937) about having visited Ben Salmon at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital in Washington, D.C., and pointing out that Salmon, a “Catholic, Single Taxer, and vegetarian,” had befriended the guard who was force-feeding him during his hunger strike and converted the guard to pacifism.⁶⁵ Around this time, in 1937, Salmon was introduced to the readership of *The Catholic Worker* newspaper with a photo and excerpts of his writings defending the World War I conscientious objectors and exposing the prison conditions to which they were subjected.⁶⁶ In 1942, Salmon was again featured in *The Catholic Worker*, this time through “An Open Letter to President Wilson” which he wrote in October 1919.⁶⁷

It was through this reprint that Salmon’s story was passed on to Gordon Zahn while he was at Camp Simon, an alternative-service entity holding Catholic conscientious objectors during World War II.⁶⁸ After the war, Zahn studied sociology at Catholic University

under Fr. Paul Hanly Furfey and went on to write several important books on war, peace, and conscientious objection in Catholic tradition, including *German Catholics and Hitler's Wars*, a study of Catholic conformity and resistance to war under the Nazi regime, and *In Solitary Witness*, a study of Franz Jagerstatter, an Austrian Catholic who refused to participate in the Nazi-controlled military and was martyred in 1943.⁶⁹

Decades later, in 1983, Zahn suggested to a graduate student at the University of Massachusetts in Boston that he “try to find information on Ben Salmon, one of the few Roman Catholic conscientious objectors to war in this country during World War I.” The fruit of Zahn’s suggestion was Torin Finney’s *Unsung Hero of the Great War*.⁷⁰ Through this book, Salmon’s story became more widely known among Catholic pacifists and antiwar activists and scholars. Daniel Berrigan, the Jesuit priest, poet, and peace activist, wrote a meditation about him.⁷¹ Robert Ellsberg included an entry on Salmon in *All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for Our Time*.⁷² William McNichols, a Catholic priest and artist, painted (or “wrote”) an icon of him, based on a photo of Salmon taken at Fort Leavenworth. The Catholic Peace Fellowship also published a feature article on him, plus excerpts from “An Open Letter to President Wilson” and an interview with his daughter Sr. Elizabeth Salmon, M.M., in its journal *The Sign of Peace*.⁷³ Now, almost a century after his refusal, there is an effort underway among Catholic peace activists to initiate an investigation into his possible canonization in the Catholic Church. At the very least, this group maintains, Ben Salmon should be named by the church, alongside Dorothy Day, as a “Servant of God.”

What this trajectory indicates is that we have in Ben Salmon’s story more than simply a single story of faith, conscience, and antiwar activism. We have the inauguration of a *tradition* of faith, conscience, and antiwar activism, or better yet, a *counter-tradition*, one that interrupts and mounts a challenge to the dominant Americanist tradition of Catholic thought on war, peace, and conscience in the United States.

The central claim of this Americanist tradition is that the United States is the divinely chosen instrument through which the church can fulfill its mission of bringing peace and justice to all nations. This Americanist claim shapes Michael Williams’ *American Catholics in the War*, a book so replete with nationalistic fervor that one might be

tempted to dismiss its theme and its author Williams as marginal. But this would be a mistake in several respects. For one thing, after serving at the War Council, Williams went on to found and edit the widely influential, lay-operated weekly periodical *The Commonweal*. For its founding board, he recruited several Catholic notables, including Carlton J.H. Hayes, a Catholic convert and well-regarded historian at Columbia University, and under his leadership, *The Commonweal* attracted some of the most prominent Catholic writers to its pages.⁷⁴ For another thing, Williams worked at the National Catholic War Council with two leading scholars whose viewpoints fall squarely working within Americanist tradition: Fr. Peter Guilday, a historian at the Catholic University of America, founder of the American Catholic Historical Association, and the leading trainer of graduate students in history for his generation, and Mgrs. John A. Ryan, political philosopher also at Catholic University, the director of the Social Action Department of the National Catholic Welfare Council, and the most important Catholic social thinker and legislative activist of his generation. Both Guilday and Ryan shared the Americanist perspective articulated by Williams and gave it more nuance, depth, and credibility in their scholarly work.⁷⁵ And then, there is the fact that historians ever since have narrated the creation of the National Catholic War Council as a key development, indeed as a turning point, in the history of American Catholicism, inasmuch as it forged its *national* identity, enabling Catholics to emerge from their ethnic enclaves into the U.S. mainstream where they could contribute to the “public” life of the nation.⁷⁶ These historical narratives are informed by the same basic Americanist vision that shapes Williams’ story, and they all share Williams’ assumption that Catholics have a crucial role to play in defending the nation’s democracy and freedom, especially in a time of war.

This Americanist tradition was stoutly challenged by Ben Salmon in his conscientious objection to serving in the Great War and readiness to go to prison for it—and in his writings, especially the statement he wrote at St. Elizabeth’s Hospital, in which his groundbreaking combination of traditional Catholicism and political radicalism forges an intellectual basis for Catholic pacifism that would be developed by successors. Salmon’s critique of capitalism, his disdain for the war “profiteers,” his call for unity among workers of all countries, his principle that divine law is antecedent to human law, his challenge on that basis to the authority of the state, his claim concerning the primacy of conscience, his legal argument for religious freedom, his rejection of just-

war theory and capital punishment, his grounding of his pacifist stance in the teaching and example of Christ, in the Mass, in the other sacraments, and in divine providence—each of these arguments were taken up by later generations of Catholic pacifists whose combined efforts have generated an intellectually compelling radical counter-tradition of Catholic thought on war, peace, and conscience.

At the heart of this radical counter-tradition lies the mandate not only to work for peace but to enact peace. As Salmon explains at one point in his statement:

Today, we find the scene that preceded Christ’s death reenacted. When He began to become unpopular, His prophecy that all would be scandalized by Him came true. One denied Him, another betrayed Him, nearly all of the disciples fled. And so it is today in the question of wholesale murder. Christian ministers and priests are betraying him to the hands of the profiteers; others not quite so brazen are denying Him; still others are fleeing in fear and trembling because of the government’s secret service and the unfavorable publicity by newspapers and the hysteria of the mob; how few, how very few of God’s ambassadors occupied the only pulpit that a Christian minister can honestly occupy in time of war—a prison cell!⁷⁷

Here, we see Salmon absorbing the events of his time and place into the scriptural narrative, showing how various actors playing a role in the Great War are also, whether they know it or not, playing a role in the Christian drama of human redemption. Here, we see in Salmon’s life and witness as a testimony to the possibility that we too, in our time and place, amid our own wars and rumors of wars, can take our positions on the front lines in the Army of Peace.

NOTES

1. Torin Finney, *Unsung Hero of the Great War: The Life and Witness of Ben Salmon* (New York: Paulist, 1989), 120. Brackets in original.

2. The information for this sketch of Salmon’s story is taken primarily from Finney, *Unsung Hero*. Places where material is added or corrected are duly noted. For example, whereas Finney gives 1889 as the year of Salmon’s birth (*ibid.*, 11), historical documentation indicates that it was 1888. See, for example, his draft registration card (“United States World War I Draft Registration Cards, 1917–1918,” database with images, *FamilySearch* (December 12, 2014), <https://familysearch.org/>

ark:/61903/1:1:KZKZ-DF6. Accessed October 9, 2016. Benjamin Joseph Salmon, 1917-1918; citing Denver City no 1, Colorado, United States, NARA microfilm publication M1509 (Washington D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, n.d.); FHL microfilm 1,544,475. I am indebted to Steve Smith for informing me about this discrepancy.

3. Finney, *Unsung Hero*, 12–14.

4. For a background on the mining wars in Colorado, see Marilyn S. Johnson, ed., “The American West: A Violent Land?” introduction to *Violence in the West: The Johnson County Range War and the Ludlow Massacre: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2009), 18–29. For more on the Ludlow Massacre and events leading up to it, see Thomas G. Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America’s Deadliest Labor War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2008).

5. Finney, 14.

6. Finney, *Unsung Hero*, 14–23.

7. For a recent account on the Peace’s Council of America for Democracy and Peace, see Michael Kazin, *War Against War: The American Fight for Peace: 1914–1918* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2017), 214–223.

8. *Ibid.*, 20–21, 24–37.

9. *Ibid.*, 36–49, 49.

10. *Ibid.*, 49–67.

11. *Ibid.*, 67–83.

12. Michael Williams, *American Catholics in the War: National Catholic War Council, 1917–1921* (New York: Macmillan, 1921), 8. For Gibbons’ letter to Wilson, see *ibid.*, 3–5.

13. *Ibid.*, 14–87.

14. *Ibid.*, 101.

15. *Ibid.*, 179.

16. *Ibid.*, 240.

17. *Ibid.*, 267.

18. *Ibid.*, 104.

19. *Ibid.*, 462.

20. *Ibid.*, 467.

21. Here it should be noted that Fr. John A. Ryan of the Welfare Council interceded with Newton D. Baker, Secretary of War. The correspondence between Baker and Ryan, if any exists, could shed light on the motives involved in obtaining Salmon’s release.

22. Benjamin Joseph Salmon, “A Treatise on Conscientious Objection to War, Capital Punishment, and Homicide,” 35, 42. <https://archive.org/details/BeSalmonOnWar>. Accessed October 9, 2016.

23. *Ibid.*, 35.

24. *Ibid.*, 36–37.

25. *Ibid.*, 37.

26. *Ibid.*

27. *Ibid.*, 38.

28. *Ibid.*, 39.

29. *Ibid.*

30. Ibid., 43.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid., 45–46.
33. Ibid., 46.
34. Ibid., 48.
35. Ibid., 49.
36. Ibid., 54.
37. Ibid., 55.
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid., 50; cf. *ibid.*, 221.
40. Ibid., 50.
41. Ibid., 67; cf. *Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. “war.”
42. Ibid., 78; see also *ibid.*, 93.
43. Ibid., 86–87.
44. Ibid., 83.
45. Ibid., 87.
46. Ibid., 89.
47. Ibid., 92.
48. Ibid., 188.
49. Ibid., 143–150.
50. Ibid., 150–184.
51. Ibid., 163.
52. Ibid., 136–137.
53. Ibid., 140–141.
54. Ibid., 222.
55. Regarding the Knights of Columbus prayer book, see *ibid.*, 189–193, 197–199, 202–206.
56. Ibid., 206–209.
57. Ibid., 210–211.
58. Ibid., 211.
59. Ibid., 212.
60. Ibid., 60–61.
61. Ibid., 63, 63–64.
62. Ibid., 57.
63. Finney, *Unsung Hero*, 85–89.
64. Norman Thomas, *The Conscientious Objector in America* (New York: B.W. Huebsch, Inc., 1923), 247–248.
65. Ammon Hennacy, *The Book of Ammon*, 2nd ed., ed. Jim Missey and Joan Thomas (Baltimore: Fortkamp Publishing Company, 1994), 53.
66. “Conscientious Objector,” *The Catholic Worker*, Vol. 5 (September 1937): 1; *The Catholic Worker*, Vol. 5 (October 1937): 1.
67. This lengthy letter was presented in two installments: Ben Salmon, “An Open Letter to President Wilson,” *The Catholic Worker*, Vol. 9 (January 1942): 3; *The Catholic Worker*, Vol. 9 (February 1942): 6.
68. Writing of his experience decades later, Zahn mentions having learned of Salmon through *The Catholic Worker*. See Gordon Zahn, *Another Part of the War: The Camp Simon Story* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1979), 272, n. 7.

69. Gordon C. Zahn, *German Catholics and Hitler's Wars* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1962); Zahn, *In Solitary Witness*, rev. ed. (Springfield, IL: Templegate, 1964).

70. Finney, *Unsung Hero*, xiii–xiv.

71. The meditation is on display at Jonah House in Baltimore and can be found online. <http://www.jonahhouse.org/archive/BenSalmon.htm>. Accessed October 9, 2016.

72. Ellsberg, Robert, *All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for Our Time* (New York: Crossroad, 2004), 77–79.

73. “The Life and Witness of Ben Salmon,” “Salmon and *The Catholic Worker*,” “Remembering Dad,” *The Sign of Peace: Journal of the Catholic Peace Fellowship*, Vol. 6 (Spring 2007): 9–21.

74. Roger van Allen, *The Commonwealth and American Catholicism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974).

75. Michael J. Baxter, “In Service to the Nation: A Critical Analysis of the Formation of the Americanist Tradition in Catholic Social Ethics” (PhD diss., 1996). See especially chapters 3 and 4.

76. See, for example, John F. Piper, Jr., “Father John J. Burke, C.S.P. and the Turning Point in American Catholic History,” *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia* 92 (March–December 1981): 101–113; John Tracy Ellis, *American Catholicism*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969); Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience* (New York: Image Books, 1985); David J. O’Brien, *Public Catholicism* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1989). For a critique of these three histories, see Michael J. Baxter, “Writing History in a World without Ends: An Evangelical Catholic Critique of United States Catholic History,” *Pro Ecclesia* V (Fall 1996): 440–469.

77. *Ibid*, 144.