

The material below was written by a friend and fellow parishioner to assist pastors and others in Church leadership to address difficult questions of conscience in times of war or impending war. I believe that these reflections are very helpful resources for pastoral leadership, and I commend them to you whole heartedly.

Deacon Clarke E. Cochran
St. John Neumann Parish

Director of Deacon Formation
Diocese of Lubbock in Texas
(ccochran@catholiclubbock.org)

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Feast of St. Francis

To Father

From Elsa Sabath – Catholic convert since 1984, former Navy wife during Vietnam, conscientious objector, and retired biologist, elsa.sabath@gmail.com
(If you see value in this material, please use it and forward it to others for their consideration and distribution.)

With urgent concern for ongoing suffering and deaths, I ask you to consider some form of action at this time on the following. It regards the need – if your parish is like mine – to help parishioners:

1. *know* the full range of Church teaching on conscience and war
2. *express* openly and lovingly their conscientious beliefs about war
3. *extend* mutual respect to other parishioners whose positions of conscience differ from one's own, whether it is:
 - service in the military
 - selective conscientious objection, or
 - conscientious objection to all war
4. *receive* appropriate parish acknowledgement and support for these positions, each valid in Church teaching, when parishioners live them out in action (more on levels of support below)
5. as a consequence of the above and with parish assistance, to be able to *listen* thoughtfully to one another as part of each person's ongoing formation of conscience on war and particular wars.

While comprehensive educational materials should be developed, *preliminary steps* can be taken now to meet the urgencies of our parish, domestic, and world situations.

Through the ministry of the Church, priests have given me healing and a capacity for joy I have not found anywhere else. In gratitude, I hope that what follows will make your own work easier.

Below is what assistance I can offer as a lay person, encouraged by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd edition* (¶¶899, 907):

- what happened in my own parish, as background and example of what may easily have happened in many parishes.
- three levels of support each parishioner needs to know to express sincere mutual respect.
- a sample “Letter to Parishioners” usable as a bulletin insert, adapted and signed by the priest.
- this letter itself as a source of material for priests, deacons, religious and other parish leaders, laity in group discussions or individual reading, and/or for homilies and other forms of catechesis. For this reason part of it includes familiar information.

What the Bishops wrote in 1983 applies, of course, today: “[W]e urge every diocese and parish to implement balanced and objective educational programs to help people at all age levels to understand better the issues of war and peace.... [I]mplementation of such programs must receive a high priority.... They must teach the full impact of our Christian faith.... They are questions of life and death” (USCCB, *The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response*, May 3, 1983, ¶280).

A Parish Experience

In our Texas parish during the days following the bombing of Iraq, military personnel and their families were given highly visible, on-going support. It was a loving response to those closest to us whose lives had been thrown into enormous stress.

Nevertheless, the manner in which support was given overlooked a number of parishioners. Some were military who had grave reservations about the war. Others had their own valid positions of conscience against the war. The war fervor nationwide was frightening. Without guidance from priests and parish leaders, most or all of us did not know how to express in any parish-wide way both our continued “loyal opposition” to the war (expressed openly prior to the bombing) and also support for the military friends and families we loved. Some of us fell silent under a sense of fait accompli. Others faded quietly into the background from a sense of decency (but of compromised integrity, too), not wanting to cause more stress to military families already in deep anxiety.

When we Catholics serve in good conscience in the military, or when we come to believe in our heart of hearts that we cannot obey particular orders in war, or fight in a particular war, or participate in war itself, we ache – all of us – to be claimed by our parish, through which the teachings of the Church are transmitted and lived. How can a parish give open, caring support to the military and families in their need, to the conscientious objector arrested for civil disobedience, and any other parishioner who takes a sacrificial stand for conscience and the common good as he or she prayerfully understands it?

Catechesis for Mutual Understanding and Respect:

In my understanding, to be able to respect one another and to share information and viewpoints respectfully on any war – not just a particular war – parishioners need to be aware of at least three things beyond just war principles:

1. How to distinguish between and express different *levels of support for another's stand* of conscience. These will be described below.
2. *The service and sacrifices of persons holding each position of conscience.* I will give most space to conscientious objectors, for parishioners are least familiar with them. Even in times of peace, urgent parish problems have almost always crowded out basic catechesis on war and conscience, leaving the formation of young adults and others primarily to a culture hostile toward conscientious objection.
3. A basic understanding of *nonviolent action and civil disobedience* that are done *with respect for authority.* As illustration, I describe how my own action of civil disobedience was conducted one week before the Iraq war began, factors important in my formation of conscience about civil disobedience, and an appendix listing *paragraphs on authority* from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which must be weighed and discerned.

In good faith *Catholics may differ on the interpretation of Church teaching* that bears on the limits of civil authority and the legitimacy of nonviolent civil disobedience, one of many forms of nonviolent action.

Nonviolent action comes into the lives of some Catholics when they believe civil authority has been over-reached or is not fulfilling its responsibilities, whether it is injustice in domestic or foreign affairs or war.

The poverty of catechesis on nonviolent action and civil disobedience has left many Catholics vulnerable to secular judgments about it with little context for any real evaluation. Rather, they tend to “shoot the messenger” without hearing the message.

More on a Parish Experience

After my action of nonviolent civil disobedience against a pre-emptive strike one week preceding the bombing of Iraq, I requested a bulletin insert to inform my parish that I was safe, why I had done it, and how it was done with as much respect for authorities and the law as possible. I was denied and offered no other channel of communication.

Had there been previous catechesis such as I suggest in this letter, I believe the outcome would have been altered.

A week later, when the bombing of Iraq began, another position of conscience received a different response:

The parish blossomed with “Support Our Troops” – on signs over donation barrels for personal care items, in bulletin repeatedly, in Mass announcements. Photos of parish military and families were posted over the barrels in the entrance to the church.

Such different outcomes of private vs. parish-wide attention might have occurred in almost any parish. How do we give equitable pastoral care to diverse positions of conscience on war, all valid under Church teaching?

Confusion with “Support Our Troops”

“Support our Troops” is a commonly used but vague exhortation. It fails to distinguish among the following levels of support:

1. *support in the sense of compassion and respect for anyone* taking a position of conscience that involves suffering, even when one disagrees with that position.
2. *support for (agreement with) someone’s belief or position* of conscience itself.
3. *support for their actions, or manner in which that position of conscience is lived out.*

Failure to distinguish different types of support produces the result that “support our troops” comes to mean “support the war they have been sent to wage.” Such blurring permits Catholics and non-Catholics alike to believe incorrectly that the entire Catholic Church also supports the war. This failure to distinguish also leaves parishioners who are not able to give support beyond compassion and respect without an honest representation of their views. Neither “I support our troops” nor “I do not support our troops” is accurate for them. *The same lack of clarity prevents one from accurately expressing one’s level of support for a conscientious objector* who engages in nonviolent but illegal action. Situations like this cause frustration and eat away at feelings of unity and harmony within the Church.

The Catholic Church traditionally is nuanced in her communications. Therefore, thinking parishioners are troubled when she adopts the oversimplifications of the secular world in phrases like “support our troops.”

Clearly as a parish we ought to give our military parishioners compassionate support and respect for their commitment to a sacrificial stand for conscience. Just as clearly as a parish we need to do the same for those parishioners who take other painful stands for conscience’s sake.

We Are One Body

Parishioners at Mass worship with many Catholic brothers and sisters, sharing unity in compassion and love of one Lord, and - in our humanness - diversity of conscience in that same love. The Church has all the following among her people:

1. *military men and women ready to go* when called; in doing so, they offer suffering and possible death to defend us as they see necessary. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, ¶¶1909, 2265, 2308-2310, 2239-2240; USCCB, *The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response*, May 3, 1983, ¶232.)
2. *their families and others who support the war*
3. *military men and women who do not believe in “this war,” but honor the commitment they have made to serve;* under heavy pressure to hold their belief in silence, theirs is a most lonely position of suffering borne often with great dignity. Family members who share their convictions also suffer emotional isolation from parish and other usual sources of support as seemingly “everyone else” enters pro-war enthusiasm.

4. *conscientious objectors to “this war” and/or to all war* (*Catechism*, ¶¶2311, 2242, 2306, 2313, 1902-1903, 1776, 1782, 1790; *Declaration on Conscientious Objection and Selective Conscientious Objection*, U. S. Catholic Conference, October 21, 1971). They are “obliged to serve the human community in some other way.” (*Catechism*, ¶2311; USCCB, *Challenge of Peace*, ¶¶222-230, 233).

Service and Sacrifice – Military Personnel and Conscientious Objectors:

Most of us are familiar with the varied reasons for joining the *military*. A few among them are educational opportunity, exit from a destructive environment, economic necessity, and the lifestyle provided a family – good housing, medical care, caring neighbors, a sense of community. One’s conscientious responsibility to family can weigh heavily indeed with other conscientious considerations.

Most of us also have at least some small idea of the *sufferings of military life*, among them *separations*, acute *emotional suffering* from many causes, the *risk of physical injury and death*, and sadly, *ugly words* from some individuals that seem unable to empathize with all who are entangled in war’s suffering.

Both *military personnel and conscientious objectors share the profound drive to serve and protect one’s wider community*. They differ primarily in method.

To discover the way each of us must follow, we need help from the parish to see the full picture of Church teaching. Then each of us respectfully must trust that (1) *others also have made the best conscientious decision possible and (2) like all of us should, they will seek an ongoing formation of conscience* as events unfold and the insights each has to offer are shared.

The *service of conscientious objectors* is poorly understood. During times of a military draft, it is often assumed that conscientious objector men want only to shirk their duty. No one can look into the heart to see with certainty how many fit this perception. I can only say that almost all of the conscientious objectors I know – young and white-headed seniors, men and women, often volunteers, in between as well as during wars – work hard at home and internationally *to correct conditions that form the roots of war* and to *alleviate* somewhat the decades of *misery – and hatred* – of those who suffer from common business practices of “American” multinational corporations abroad.

Some conscientious objectors serve in *medical capacities and social services*. (Military persons or potential draftees who want more information may contact the center for conscience and war, 1-800-379-2679 - www.nisbco.org)

Some conscientious objectors are *veterans* who have “been there.” They can be a powerful voice for military personnel who cannot speak their conscientious beliefs without risk of severe penalty.

Many are *senior citizens* whose memory spans over half a century of wars and have seen for themselves that “truth is the first casualty of war.”

In a number of ways, the work of conscientious objectors *helps prevent wrongful deployment of our armed services* and the needless suffering it causes. “They bear legitimate witness to the gravity of the physical and moral risks of recourse to violence, with all its destruction and death.” (*Catechism*, ¶2306)

Some are “*prayer warriors*.”

To keep us better informed, some find and *make available news of events* as seen from different countries, including reports from Catholic and other religious organizations working abroad, and *not covered by our usual media*.

Some *try to stop policy* believed to be ultimately unjust and harmful or *gravely dangerous to the common good*. They may feel called to engage in *legal demonstrations* or forms of *nonviolent civil disobedience*. (*Catechism*, ¶¶2242, 2306, 1782; *Challenge of Peace*, p. 36, 69-73; NCCB, *The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace*, November 17, 1993, §I.B.1). At minimum, they bear *public witness to points of view and alternative options often missing* from ordinary consideration, for their commitment to conscientious objection provides some insulation from “bandwagon” effects.

With their ability to ask hard questions, to tolerate being different, and to access a variety of news, they *help protect us* against *internal failure* – temporary or permanent – *of our democratic process*. Sadly, today’s world includes multinational business interests whose budgets exceed those of many nations, with corresponding influence often wielded behind the scenes in government offices and media headquarters.

As conscientious objectors, seniors and others have *suffered loss of life (especially as humanitarian aid workers), health, money and property, freedom (jail and/or extended government surveillance) and the respect of the neighbors*. They are commonly called *unpatriotic, un-American and worse*.

Toward Understanding Nonviolent Action and Nonviolent Civil Disobedience:

I was a Navy wife during Vietnam and became a full conscientious objector in 1975. On March, 11, 2003, at age 63 and just before the start of the Iraq war, I expressed my position of conscience opposing the war through a nonviolent action of civil disobedience. (Again, not all Catholics interpret Church teaching to permit nonviolent civil disobedience.)

Before and during the action I asked for and received very helpful individual pastoral care, especially appreciated since the priest then at the parish had strong reservations about nonviolent civil disobedience. A week before the action, I personally delivered detailed written notice about it to enforcement officers; it included my apologies for causing them extra work. At the action in the main hall of my hometown federal building, I shook hands with the Homeland Security officer and thanked him for his assistance with safety arrangements. Then after making a statement to the press, I courteously refused to leave the building at closing time. I was arrested, handcuffed, jailed, fingerprinted, released by nurse’s order after six hours, and later fined \$150.00, which I paid.

In my view of nonviolent civil disobedience, one must be willing to honor and *fulfill the law by accepting the due process of the law and any just penalty* it assigns. One must conduct oneself with *a respectful attitude toward authorities*. I see the *nonviolently broken law as the equivalent of illegally entering a stranger’s house to phone the fire department when all other phones are filled with static*.

My nonviolent civil disobedience is based on prudential judgments (*Catechism*, ¶1788) formed from weighing the ministry of Jesus, Church teaching in the *Catechism* (¶2242, etc) and Vatican II documents, and the USCCB statements (see Appendix). I

was also aided by the witness of others (*Catechism*, ¶1785), clergy who guided my search for clarity, and a lot of prayer.

I think *nonviolent action – both within the law and civil disobedience – is best described as a “paralegal” American institution which methods have helped maintain the spirit of the Constitution for over 200 years.* It is a heritage *that began in Colonial times* against the British. To paraphrase a personal communication from Gene Sharp of the Albert Einstein Institution, nonviolent action had influenced the granting of major characteristics of independence (legislative, executive and judicial powers, the power to tax, and the power to have a militia) to almost three-fourths of the thirteen colonies *before* the war broke out. More information is available in *Resistance, Politics and the American Struggle for Independence, 1765-1775*; Walter Conser, Jr., Ronald McCarthy, David Toscano, and Gene Sharp, eds.; Lynne Rienner Pub.; 1989, 569pp.

At critical moments, nonviolent action has assisted a faltering governmental system to fulfill its promise – to extend democracy’s rights to African Americans, women, employees, other ordinary citizens, etc. It continues to offer a voice for unheard, despairing people.

Generally, nonviolent action is used when there is a need to participate fairly in social debates and in fair and just decisions about our common good. It is *used when big money has taken to itself most of the power intended for the vote and for other public feedback to governing officials. It attempts to balance a heavily consolidated media* where money and/or a very few executives can refuse almost all mainline media coverage even to majority views.

Vatican II addresses media issues in Communio et Progressio: “How can one avoid the concentration of power to communicate in too few hands, so that any real dialogue is killed?” (#21), “Communicators...have to gather up different views and compare them and transmit them so that people can understand and make a proper decision” (#27), “Freedom of opinion and the right to be informed go hand in hand. Pope John XXIII, Pope Paul VI and the Second Vatican Council have all stressed this right to information which today is essential for the individual and for society in general” (#33), “The recipients of information...have a right and duty to expect...that a rapid and clear correction should follow any mistake or misrepresentation that has found its way into a report. They are to protest whenever omissions or distortions occur. They are to protest whenever events have been reported out of context or in a biased manner. They are to protest whenever the significance of events has been wildly exaggerated or underplayed” (#41). (All above italics are mine.)

Disrupters of nonviolent actions who sometimes intrude themselves with their own often violent agendas pose threats to everyone. Nonviolent protesters are glad to cooperate with the authorities to remove these threats.

The risk to society of attempting to eliminate or to ignore nonviolent action is quite serious. *Nonviolent action is a final safety net of democratic values and social justice.* If its cause does not reflect some fundamental injustice, it will not progress far as a movement among ordinary people. Yet when enough ordinary people are willing to endure the same risk of bodily injury and death as those in the military, only without inflicting the same, nonviolent action is highly effective in supporting a just society.

When first our government and then nonviolent action have failed to address widespread social wrongs, we have seen riots and fire sweep through Watts, Detroit, etc.

And should nonviolent action be discouraged, we increase the probability that homegrown terrorists will attempt to force change or simply vent rage, having learned from everyday media the methods of international terrorists (*Catechism*, ¶1930).

Fear that indiscriminately misrepresents nonviolent protesters as criminals or anarchists or terrorists that do not respect the law, *fear* of the unfamiliar and of confrontation, and fear of loss of special advantage are *unaffordable luxuries* compared to domestic and foreign social justice concerns that, unremedied *in a post 9/11 world*, make us all seriously unsafe.

In Summary:

- 1) for parishioners to *respect* one another's different conscientious positions on war,
- 2) for each position to receive *open parish/pastoral support*, and
- 3) for each parishioner to be able to share *insights* that assist all with *continued formation of conscience* on particular wars and wars in general,

I ask that parishioners be made aware of:

- 1) the *levels of support* that they may offer,
- 2) the *service and sacrifices* of military and conscientious objector alike
- 3) an understanding of *nonviolent action and nonviolent civil disobedience* used by some conscientious objectors to “fight” for “Justice...the general Welfare, and... Liberty” (Preamble to the Constitution).

Any catechesis, especially during war-fervor, *requires careful wording*. I recognize that when war-oriented patriotism escalates, many parishioners are left emotionally volatile and unable to think calmly without considerable support. Yet *failure to act increases the likelihood that our military will be misused* for political or business interests, with additional suffering and death for members of every parish and for families abroad.

Perhaps the following or similar “Letter to the Parish,” used as a bulletin insert or other handout, offers a beginning for priests. Men and women of the armed services deserve our most thoughtful support – support that takes a hard look at particular wars. All parishioners deserve courageous guidance in the faith from their pastors and other Church leaders.

Letter to the Parish During Threat of War and War Itself

American Catholics continue to face the bitterness of war. Outrage and dread compete for our attention. Our hearts are filled with waiting, grief, a desire to “blot it all out,” and the need to “do something.”

Decisions of our leaders unfold. Our own personal and family decisions are made day by day. We pray for God’s mercy and wisdom. We yearn for answers to the suffering of military and civilians here and abroad.

For those in the armed services it is a time of acute suffering – possible or actual death, disruption of life plans, separation from family, and much more. Adding to the stress are different beliefs about war within the Church and even within oneself, as well as the differences between Americans in general.

More than ever we need our fellow parishioners and the unity of compassion that are so strong in our faith. *With heartfelt concern we ask how we can address the suffering of all that are or will become involved in war here and abroad.* We continue steadfast appreciation of our troops that serve abroad in answer to conscience. They earn the profound respect of us all for a decision of conscience that may result in final self-sacrifice. This respect for their commitment – to do right as they understand it – remains whether or not one agrees with their position of conscience, and whether or not one agrees that war is the appropriate action to take

As we respect fellow parishioners who serve in the military, so it is also right to respect any parishioner who takes a stand based on a well-formed conscience rather than on sloth or self-interest.

The bishops of the Church wrote during the Second Vatican Council, “Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself, but which he must obey...His dignity lies in observing this law, and by it he will be judged” (*Gaudium et Spes*, ¶16). *One must make diligent efforts to inform one’s conscience well with regard to Church teachings and knowledge of the situation one faces.* One “must always seriously seek what is right and good” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, ¶1787.)

Church teaching affirms three positions of conscience on war (*Catechism*, ¶¶2309-14: *Declaration on Conscientious Objection and Selective Conscientious Objection*, United States Catholic Conference, October 21, 1971):

1. *Military service until given orders to perform immoral or unjust acts.* Service in the military is the position most familiar to Catholic laypersons;
2. *Selective conscientious objection* (some international recognition, but none officially by US government or military) where one in conscience refuses to fight in some wars, yet is obliged to serve the human community in other ways; and
3. *General conscientious objection* where one refuses to fight in all wars yet is obliged to serve the human community in some other way. (Procedures for applying are in federal and military law. 1-800-379-2679 – www.nisbco.org)

Different kinds of sacrifice occur with each of the above. The Church calls all parishioners to compassionately alleviate the sufferings of others. We must not forget any of our own who suffer for actions they take because of conscience. Even when conscience remains in error despite efforts to form it well according to Church teaching,

we do not ignore them. We continue to respect them and their efforts even as we openly express our own conscientious beliefs.

We have already spoken of the suffering of men and women who bear arms on our behalf. In addition, *military men and women who find they do not believe in “this war,” but honor the commitment they have made to serve, frequently suffer emotional isolation* whether they remain silent or speak out. So do their families. Theirs is a most lonely position often borne with great dignity. An open affirmation by the parish is deeply appreciated even when it must remain without names.

Military men and women who refuse to serve in a particular war for reason of conscience face immense stress as they go through the legalities involved and the very real possibility of court martial, jail time and/or less than honorable discharge. Theirs is a special order of courage. They need our full understanding.

The role of selective and general conscientious objectors is poorly understood by most people. At times *conscientious objectors have suffered loss of life – especially as humanitarian aid workers abroad - health, money and property, freedom (jail and/or extended government surveillance), and the respect of their neighbors.* They are commonly called unpatriotic, un-American or worse. They may include women and others not historically subject to a draft but wanting to live their beliefs. Their service to our country takes a number of forms, among them medical and social service (recognized by the U.S. military as alternative service), prayer, publicizing news and views not covered by mainline media, attempts to change policies believed to be against the common good through letter writing, legal nonviolent demonstrations and other nonviolent activities. These may include nonviolent civil disobedience (*The Harvest of Justice*, §I.B.1; Catechism, ¶2242, 2306). (In good faith, Catholics still differ about the legitimacy of nonviolent civil disobedience as they strive to interpret Church teaching.)

The service of conscientious objectors helps prevent wrongful deployment of brave men and women who have the right to be called to combat only as a last resort in times of real need.

“The education of the conscience is a lifelong task” (*Catechism*, ¶1784). *Current events often make it necessary for all Catholics to reexamine their conscientious beliefs and decisions about war.* Church teaching with prayerful study does apply to the world in which we find ourselves today. Ours is not the luxury of secular emotionalism and bandwagon thinking.

When it is hard to understand the person who worships in the pew next to us, we must remember how Jesus loves each of us. We must remember his commandment “Love one another” even when we are alarmed by another person’s conscientious decisions and actions. We must remember all the things that we share in common. The joyful times of celebrations in the Church and in our homes. The times of working together on projects to strengthen the Church and to minister to one another when trouble falls upon us.

We are all one Body in Christ, called to unity in compassion, to mutual respect for each person’s conscientious search for truth assisted by the Church (*Catechism*, ¶¶1782-1783), and to an ever more profound dependency on the Eucharist, in our need drawing on Christ’s strength to sustain and protect us.

Appendix:

Authority – Selected paragraphs from the *Catechism*:

Some of the following paragraphs legitimize authority and the obligation to obey it by specifying that authority is instituted by God. Some of the paragraphs elaborate what legitimate authority and its obligations look like in detail. The parish of Saint Charles Borromeo has a user-friendly website to access the *Catechism* by paragraph number: <http://www.scborromeo.org/index2.htm>.

450	1923	2234-2240	2256
1897-1909	1930	2242-2243	2265
1918-1921	2199	2248	2308-2313

Nonviolent Civil Disobedience – Some Influences on my Prudential Judgment

The following have helped me form my conscience with regard to certain kinds of civil disobedience: the ministry of Jesus; over 50 paragraphs of the *Catechism* on authority (see above); conscience (¶1776, etc.); defense (¶2309, etc.); conscientious objection (¶2311, etc.); prudence (¶¶1787-1788, etc.), and one that does not rule out civil disobedience (“Those who renounce violence...and ...make use of those means of defense available to the weakest...” ¶2306); a sentence from the NCCB, *The Harvest of Justice is Sown in Peace* 1993, §I.B.1, which lists nonviolent civil disobedience as one of the methods of Christian nonviolent resistance: “The vision of Christian nonviolence...consists of a commitment to resist manifest injustice and public evil with means other than force. These include dialogue, negotiations, protests, strikes, boycotts, civil disobedience, and civilian resistance.”

The Media – Selected Paragraphs from Vatican II Documents

Although Vatican II documents refer to “all who forgo the use of violence...and resort to those other means of defense which are available to weaker parties” (*Gaudium et Spes*, ¶3, lines 11-16), nonviolent civil disobedience is not specified by name. However, nonviolent civil disobedience does address weaknesses in the media that the documents do specify. Besides intent to influence decision-makers and public opinion directly, it assists public debate when mainline media fail to serve the public adequately; this is done by providing information and points of view important to the common good in a dramatic setting of protest with arrest that is under normal circumstances attractive to the media.

The following citations assist one to evaluate America’s progressively consolidated mainline media and how well it functions compared to Vatican II teaching. They are from the *Decree on the Means of Social Communication* (*Inter Mirifica*) and the *Pastoral Instruction on the Means of Social Communication* (*Communio et Progressio*):

IM §5
CP §§21, 26-30, 41, 44-47, 82, 84, 87

Father, thank you for your consideration.

Elsa Sabath
elsa.sabath@gmail.com
<http://elsa.sabath.net/wp-trackback.php/4>

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