

REFLECTIONS

St. Martin and the Conscription of Care

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St. Martin and the Conscription of Care

I arrived on active duty to find that the cult of the saints has been taken up into a kind of civil religious practice among American soldiers.¹ My first assignment as a chaplain was with the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault). St. Michael was our patron saint. This angelic warrior is a patron for all soldiers, but for airborne soldiers especially.² Soldiers asked me for St. Michael medallions within days of my arrival to the unit. "Oh okay, you're Catholic. Got it. Let me see what we've got. Nope not Catholic. Oh, you're not even Christian. Interesting." For some, these medallions are genuine parts of their religious devotion. For most, these medallions are superstitious kitsch—"We're going to war; I'll take whatever you've got"—or civil religious paraphernalia. These medallions often have the image of St. Michael (or another saint) on one side and the unit patch or regimental crest on the other. There is nothing subtle in this framing about whether God is with the unit.

St. Martin of Tours is another key figure in this civil religious pantheon. This is especially true for chaplains. I want to introduce or reintroduce St. Martin. I want to share a broader story about his life and legacy, and how they shape military chaplaincy and Christian participation in war. There is more to St. Martin's story than is usually told among chaplains. What gets left out of St. Martin's story is just as important for thinking about what it means for chaplains to accompany those who go to war and care for them when they come home.

Who is St. Martin? The Status Quo Story.

I want to start by sharing what I call the status quo story. This is the story I learned along the way as an Army chaplain.

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¹ Versions of this paper were originally presented at Alma College in 2022 and the Theology Matters conference in 2023.

² And yes, I know the 101st is not an airborne unit anymore.

Martin was born in Hungary in 316 into a pagan military family.³ As the son of a Roman soldier, Martin was named for the Roman god of war, Mars. Against the wishes of his parents, the boy Martin became a catechumen, and he was intent on a monastic life. Before he was able to be baptized, Martin was conscripted by an imperial edict because of his father's service. Martin lived a modest and humble life as a soldier and was well-regarded by both his peers and superiors. As the status quo story goes, in the middle of the winter Martin came upon a beggar as he entered the gates of a city. The cries of the ill-clothed man were ignored by the passersby. But Martin saw this man, took off his cape, cut it in half with his sword, and gave him what he could. Some laughed at what remained of Martin's attire while others were ashamed of their own lack of hospitality. That night Martin had a dream of Christ himself clothed in the half of his cloak he had given the poor man. In the dream, Martin overheard Jesus exclaim to the angels: "Martin, who is still but a catechumen, clothed me with this robe."⁴

After serving in the military, Martin found his way to the monastic life he had desired since his youth, founding several monastic communities. He lived in poverty and simplicity and became well-loved and honored, so much so that against all his protests he was elevated to serve as the Bishop of Tours, France. He served in that capacity until his death in 397. Very quickly Martin became one of the most popular saints in the Western church. This soldier turned monastic turned bishop was one of the first non-martyrs to be venerated as a saint. Eventually, it became standard practice for St. Martin's cape, his *cappa*, to be taken with the French kings into battle and flown as a banner. The priest who marched with the reliquary became known as the *cappellanu* and all priests who served the military came to be known as *cappellani* or in French, *chapelains*.⁵

This is, in brief, the status quo story. In its telling, the storyteller is usually concerned to capture several key details. First, the life of Martin is etymologically and historically bound up with the emergence of Christian clergy as military chaplains. Second, and a fact that for service members and chaplains establishes further authority beyond his saintly bona fides, Martin was a soldier. His status as a conscript is usually passed over unacknowledged. Third and usually foregrounded in the telling, even as a soldier, Martin is a pastoral figure who embodies the centrality of practices of care for chaplains.

³ Or was he born in 336? The basic biographical dates for St. Martin, his birth, baptism, and military service are contested. This contestation is central to the conundrum his military service presented to the church, even during his life. See Clare Stancliffe, *St. Martin and His Hagiographer: History and Miracle in Sulpicius Severus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 111-33.

⁴ Sulpicius Severus, *On the Life of St. Martin*.

⁵ See Michael McCormack, "The Liturgy of War from Antiquity to the Crusades," in *The Sword of the Lord: Military Chaplains from the First to the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Doris L. Bergen (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2004), 45-46.

The story of the beggar and the cape is, of course, the primary canonical example as it ties military chaplains and the chaplaincy itself directly to this act of compassion.

The status quo story bolsters the legitimacy of military chaplaincy.⁶ Martin serves as the unofficial patron saint of chaplains and the U.S. Army Chaplain Corps specifically. It is important to note that the highest award within the Chaplain Corps as an Army branch is being inducted into the Order of St. Martin of Tours. For chaplains, the status quo story provides a historical anchor, origin story, and animating myth that serves to establish both the legitimacy of clergy within the military and the basic role of chaplains.⁷

Chaplains feel the need to justify military chaplaincy because the goodness of military service is not a given in all religious communities. The goodness of clergy in uniform is not a given either. There are both sacred and secular counter-narratives that raise questions about the status quo story. It is interesting, then, that these counter pressures bubble up from within the very life of Martin himself.

What the Status Quo Story Leaves Out

The tellers of the status quo story usually leave out that Martin was intent on leaving military service.⁸ As the story goes, on the eve of a campaign in Germany, the Emperor Julian came out to pay his troops the donative. The emperor wisely sought to lift morale and cements the loyalty of his soldiers by paying them before sending them into battle. Upon coming before the emperor to receive his pay Martin instead asked for a discharge. Martin said to Julian: “Hitherto I have served you as a soldier: allow me now to become a soldier to God: let the man who is to serve you receive your pay: I am the soldier of Christ: it is not lawful for me to fight.”⁹ The emperor did not take this well and accused Martin of cowardice and imprisoned him. In reply, Martin told the emperor he was no coward and would go unarmed with them into battle the next day. But the German “barbarians” begged for peace and the battle never happened. Martin was eventually released from imprisonment and from military service.

6 This is not the only purpose of the story and not the only story told to establish the legitimacy of military chaplains, but it is an important one.

7 One further note on the story of St. Martin as a civil religious story. When an Armistice was declared on the 11th day of the 11th month at the 11th hour in 1918, that is precisely when in France, England, Holland and Germany, St. Martinmas or St. Martinstag is celebrated. The timing of the Armistice is no coincidence and so it is that our current American holiday of Veterans Day has been mapped directly on top of the feast of St. Martin.

8 This is central to the contestation of his dates. Did Martin continue to serve as a soldier *after* his baptism? See Stancliffe, *St. Martin and His Hagiographer*, 111-33. Stancliffe thinks that he did.

9 Severus, *On the Life*.

In Luke 3, John the Baptist, standing on the bank of the Jordan river, calls on those gathered to repent and be baptized. Some soldiers were there, and they ask: “what should we do?” He said to them, ‘Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages’” (Luke 3:14, *NRSV*).¹⁰ Be satisfied with your wages. This is often used as a text to justify Christian military service. And yet, Martin refuses his pay and sets up his service to Christ in opposition to his service to the empire. The use of Martin’s relic in battle is highly ironic. The soldier of Christ is once again conscripted into the service of Caesar. The meaning of all of this is open to interpretation. Is this Martin’s clarion prophetic, no to war? To speak anachronistically, is this his Lutheran “Here I stand” moment? Or is Martin simply seeking to embody the counsels of perfection of a (would be) monastic?

Martin entered military service only a couple decades after the Emperor Constantine ended the persecution of Christians in the Roman Empire with the Edict of Milan in 313. Before Constantine, Christians typically had to leave military service before they could be baptized. Before Constantine, the church was the church of the martyrs. The cloud of witnesses includes many military martyrs, soldiers who chose to serve Christ rather than the emperor and paid with their lives. Martin’s story fits that form of military martyr accounts, but the emperor now is nominally Christian and Martin, while he’s imprisoned, mocked, and surely abused, he isn’t martyred here. He goes on to live for decades. The military service of Martin, after baptism, is somewhat of an embarrassment for his earliest biographers. They dance around this fact and make excuses for him.¹¹ Even toward the end of his life, a fellow monk taunted him that he was “defiled” by his military service and Martin does not deny it.¹²

There is much hay to be made here in setting up a binary opposition. St. Martin is either a late witness for the pacifism of the early church or an early witness for the emerging just war tradition. It matters which St. Martin shows up in the story being told: the *pastoral* soldier who cares for the beggar *with* his sword or the Bishop who augurs military victory for the Emperor Maximus or the prophet standing before the Emperor Julian.

What remains unmentioned is whether Martin ever served in combat himself. Historian Clare Stancliffe suggests that it is not only possibly, but perhaps even likely that he did. There was, in fact, a battle in the same campaign

¹⁰ This presents another interesting point of connection with St. Martin’s story. The crowd asks John the Baptist, what now? What then should we do? John replies that they should share their extra coat. St. Martin does not have an extra coat and cuts his in half.

¹¹ Again, the chronology of St. Martin’s life, especially around his birth, baptism, and military service are contested. See Stancliffe, *St. Martin and his Hagiographer*, 111-33.

¹² Severus, *On the Life*.

shortly before St. Martin renounced his service.¹³ If that is true—if Martin served in combat—if the sword by which he so compassionately shared with the beggar was stained with blood—St. Martin’s renunciation before the emperor sounds rather different. Perhaps, it is not a prophetic, no, or at least not only that. It is something much darker and sadder. Perhaps, it is the public confession of a man who has violated what he held dear and who had been turned away from a path he had been set upon since his youth. “Hitherto I have served you as a soldier: *allow me now* to become a soldier to God: let the man who is to serve you receive your pay: I am the soldier of Christ: it is not lawful for me to fight.”¹⁴ St. Martin can’t even accept his pay, perhaps fearing that it, too, is stained with blood. St. Martin emerges as a figure who may himself have been cut open by war.

Why St. Martin Matters

In light of Stancliffe’s work, we can ask whether Martin’s refusal is that of a pre-Constantinian Christian renouncing bloodshed in war or the cry of a Christian in the service of a nominally Christian emperor and empire who has already shed blood in war. St. Martin embodies how the seemingly abstract debates in the post-Constantinian church about war and military service reemerge in the lives of soldiers themselves. He both exemplifies the moral contradictions at stake in the wider debate (“hitherto I have served you as a soldier” / “it is not lawful for me to fight”) and the imperative of those potential moral wounds (“allow me now”).

While questions abound regarding Martin’s life, what is certain is that after his death, Martin’s body immediately became a relic. His body, as early as 507 A.D., served as “an oracle for kings going into battle” and “vital for the defense of the city [of Tours].”¹⁵ From there it is easy to see how, along the way, it became standard practice for St. Martin’s cape to be taken with the French kings into battle.¹⁶ The conscript who refused to do battle – perhaps even battle again—for the emperor was, even in death, unable to escape conscription.

Here it is, that for me, the story of Martin so forcefully serves to unite the shared predicament of soldiers and their chaplains. Conscription. I do not mean it in the narrow technical sense of compulsory enlistment, although that often applies. I take it to apply to the many ways the agency of both soldiers and chaplains is constrained and pressed into the service of people,

¹³ Stancliffe, *St. Martin and his Hagiographer*, 134-40.

¹⁴ Severus, *On the Life*.

¹⁵ Christopher Donaldson, *Martin of Tours: Parish Priest, Mystic, and Exorcist* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), 147.

¹⁶ McCormack, “The Liturgy of War,” 46.

ideas, stories, and nations in ways that directly and indirectly undermine or oppose the intentions, beliefs, desires, and stories of soldiers and chaplains themselves.

St. Martin is known as a patron saint of soldiers. On the surface, it seems that Martin is rather the patron saint of kings. Within the just war tradition, it is possible to see how St. Martin might figure a faithful Christian soldier who loves God and neighbor as a soldier. His sword is used to care for and draw near to his neighbor in the story of the beggar at the gate. This is the just war story: swords can be wielded for love of neighbor (even on the battlefield, even for enemies as neighbors). St. Martin's refusal before the emperor calls into question the just war story, not just because it stands in contradiction to the witness of the early church, but also because it suggests that if even St. Martin could not see his way toward faithfully loving his neighbor on the battlefield, then others of us cannot either.

In the just war story, soldiers do not send themselves into battle, they are sent by rulers with legitimate authority. Conscript or not, soldiers do not pick their battles.¹⁷ Soldiers are pressed to fight and kill, regardless of their own moral judgments about that fighting and killing. Even so there is love on the battlefield. Love abounds among soldiers as they care for, fight for, and even die for one another, as they care for innocents on the battlefield, civilians, and even as they care for wounded enemy combatants. Love persists on the battlefield not because it is necessarily called forth by the cause itself (and its animating narrative, people, etc.), but despite the many contradictions of being formed and sent to kill and die for love. Conscription ultimately means that love itself is conscripted: soldiers' love for one another, soldiers' love for those at home, their neighbors and families, and their desire to return, and soldiers' love for God.

St. Martin is also the patron saint of chaplains. I think the predicament for chaplains is quite like that of their soldiers. Chaplains, too, seek to love God and neighbor. For military chaplains, their near neighbors are the soldiers with whom they are encamped. The life and legacy of St. Martin suggests that chaplains too endure the conscription of their love, or we might say, the conscription of their care. It seems quite fitting that it was the cape that the French kings took into battle. The cape is the great symbol of Martin's neighbor love as a kind of Matthew 25 encounter with Christ himself. Military chaplains have taken on this story and symbol as central to their vocation to care for soldiers. But, to whose or to what end? No doubt chaplains, through the centuries, afforded soldiers access to pastors and pastoral care, but always in the shadow of the relics. Like those relics, the

¹⁷ Thus, I argue for selective conscientious objection.

priests and their ministry were put in service to the king's purposes in war. So it is that St. Martin status as patron is even more fitting than those who tell the status quo story realize.

Beyond St. Martin

Religion is always in danger of being conscripted or put to work in service of the state, especially in the context of war. The civil religious status quo story of St. Martin is but one example. Political leaders are all too willing to tap into the power of the sacred, to march with it into battle, both proverbially and quite literally. St. Martin's life, I hope, suggests that while the religion can be conscripted, it cannot be contained and always contains the power for refusal and reversal, and the possibility for overcoming evil with good.

There are very real questions and problems that need to be addressed within the just war tradition. My intention has not been to make a wholesale rejection. But if the tradition is to be of use, then chaplains need to be able to speak and act with faith and be prepared, at times, like St. Martin to stand before the emperor to say, no.

St. Martin also provides a window into the deep wounds of war, the double-edged sword of the kinds of loves that might take us too war, and the lament, penance, and forms of life that might mark out a way home. While I've challenged the status quo story as a civil religious simulacrum, I remain convinced that for soldiers and chaplains there can be no more fitting example of a faithful witness than St. Martin.

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