

Loyalty oath: A matter of ultimate allegiance

by [D. Brent Laytham](#) in the [July 12, 2005](#) issue

Two years ago one of my students wrote a master's thesis defending just war, then joined the U.S. Air Force to train as a fighter pilot. I suppose you could look at this as pedagogical success: I'm a teacher who helped one of my students turn the corner from theory to practice. But as a pacifist, I took it pretty hard.

Time doesn't heal all wounds, but it's a pretty good salve for injured pedagogical pride. So I hadn't given Aaron much thought until I was asked to come down to the college president's office to meet with an officer of the Department of Defense. She showed me her badge and a pile of papers, all of which asserted that she was authorized to interview me about the character of my former student. Apparently, before you can get behind the controls of a multimillion-dollar fighter plane, the U.S. runs a high-level security check.

There were a number of mundane questions about how long and how well I had known Aaron. The questions became more interesting as they turned to relationships and to character. "Did Aaron associate with disreputable people?" she asked. "Yes," I said, "he hung out with Jesus." I was thinking, of course, about Jesus' habit of associating with radicals like Simon the Zealot, cheats like Zacchaeus and riff-raff like the woman at the well. Worse, as Christopher Marshall has pointed out in *Beyond Retribution*, Jesus populated his parables with criminals and was finally condemned as one himself. But what would my interviewer think? "I know what you mean," she confided. "I sometimes serve meals at my church's soup kitchen." Apparently Jesus is not disreputable enough to disqualify you from being trusted with high-tech weaponry.

"Does Aaron belong to any organization that puts him in contact with foreign nationals?" she asked. "Yes, he's a member of the church." I wasn't trying to be coy, but catholic. In Christ we find ourselves placed in a body politic without territorial borders—the holy catholic church. The *Letter to Diognetus* puts it this way: for us

“every foreign country is [our] fatherland, and every fatherland is foreign.” Thus, we have no foreign nationals in the church, or we are all foreigners; either way, we cannot imagine that some of us are “us,” while others are “them.” At least we shouldn’t be able to imagine this.

“But did he associate with foreigners?” “Well,” I replied, “we have a number of international students here at the seminary. I’m sure that Aaron had classes with them.” I could have added that we intentionally seek to foster an awareness of global issues, hoping students from California will get to know students from Chile, wanting students from Korea to learn with students from Kansas, expecting that Mexicans and Minnesotans will pray together in every chapel.

She pursued the question, “How closely did he associate with them? Was it more than a normal amount?” How could I answer such a question, given the church’s calling to show the world that its version of “normal” simply isn’t? All I said was no. But I should have added, “The church is a ‘sign, herald and foretaste’ of the coming kingdom; we refuse to allow national borders to be mapped onto the body of Christ.”

There were many other questions, the hardest of which was, “Is he a loyal American?” I had little doubt that for Aaron the answer is yes. But what could that attestation mean coming from me, who relishes Dorothy Day’s retort “Of course we’re un-American; we’re Catholic”? I thought of Patrick Miller’s recent pamphlet on the first commandment. In *The God You Have* he differentiates between loyalty to others and obedience to God. Loyalty, he says, may appropriately be given to spouse, family, neighbor or country. It roots in and expands on the fifth commandment. Obedience, on the other hand, belongs to God and God alone. It is rooted in the absolutely fundamental claim of the first commandment. First commandment first; obedience before, beneath and beyond every loyalty.

The problem with Miller’s categories is that, in Caesar’s hands, they can too easily become a distinction without a difference. In the U.S. there is assumed to be a smooth fit between discipleship and killing. That assumption, held so easily and unreflectively, trespasses against our obedience to God alone. I wonder whether my questioner understands that for descendants of Jeremiah and followers of Jesus, obedience to God may require us to refuse the state’s claim to our loyalty. Does the Department of Defense grant that my fundamental obligation is not loyalty to country but obedience to God? I doubt it. In such circumstances, where Caesar cannot distinguish between our proper subjection and our ultimate allegiance, it may

be best to say bluntly, "A loyal American? Of course not. I'm a Christian!"

But Aaron is a Christian too, and there's the rub. My testimony now contributes to the testing of his discipleship. Will he manage to live by the moral restraint of just war, to embody its refusal of easy congruence between killing and Christ, to always remember that obedience to God trumps loyalty to country or comrade? I can only pray that he will.