

Understanding Gaudium et Spes and Pacem in Terris as they apply today in Military Service and for AMI

Catholics have both a duty and a right to share the great treasure (Jesus Christ) they carry within themselves. Cardinal Koenig expressed this eloquently in his address to AMI in 1999 commenting on this duty to witness in *Lumen Gentium* 35 “not only the hierarchy who teach in His name and with His authority but also through the laity whom He made His witnesses.” Both clergy and laity support each other and share that treasure of Christ by teaching and by witnessing to His love for us all. This year’s AMI congress in Slovenia explored how one does that in a military context and how AMI can help that happen.

Military personnel operate in a specific culture where loyalty and discipline are so ingrained in the person that one follows orders quickly and without discussion and often without dialogue because lives depend on those quick actions. However, there is also a camaraderie that extends to any other person in uniform of nearly any other national armed force that arises from a common core of shared experiences (and short hair and clean shoes, etc) which permits deep sharing. Here is where one’s joy in life, especially one’s sacramental life, can radiate a witness to others and allow the deep Catholic faith to be appreciated by those hungering today for meaning and hope in an increasingly secularist atmosphere. This is especially true in times of deployment for humanitarian operations—or in combat.

To be able to witness effectively, today’s Catholic military need preparation and support: guidance for ethical behavior, as well as training both in their own faith and in cultural sensitivity/appreciation for the people (friends, enemies, civilians) into whose midst they are being sent. They need chaplains who will reinforce their faith with sacraments, and with instructional materials brought to life by the witness of the chaplains’ own lives. Military who are returning from deployment need help healing the spiritual wounds stemming from that trauma. By specifically using “sharing of stories,” recognizing and reducing guilt, and authoritatively assuring military that their sufferings made a positive difference for the Kingdom of God Catholic chaplains and indeed the whole Catholic military community can bring a healing and some reintegration that psychologists and drugs often cannot provide.

Catholicism contributes to

- Honorable behavior in the barracks and in the field;
- Reducing the danger of misbehavior during training, operations and psychological difficult situations,
- The development of comradeship and trust;
- And thus to a better self-discipline and leadership.

Catholic organizations within various national militaries can help counter present trends to reduce or restrict chaplaincies, and AMI can assist in lobbying political or military

national authorities to increase rather than decrease chaplaincies. But AMI has a special international character that allows it to do even more to support the rights of the Catholic laity in the military to live out their apostolic duty. In every level of peacemaking, from initial contact through advanced peacekeeping, AMI can be a legitimate venue for the exchange of best practices between various national chaplaincies. Besides such networking among chaplain groups, AMI can assist Military Ordinariates with exchanges of info and programs—and provide living AMI members to make all that printed material come alive in their own countries. AMI can even be a vehicle to help military bishops network among themselves, particularly when other channels between their respective nations are closed.

In the political realm AMI can help tell stories from one military bishop to balance media perception or outright anti-Catholic propaganda. But even in less stress-filled situations AMI can intercede with civil authorities for military ordinariates or chaplaincies to provide that external support which is routinely helpful and at times can be critically important. Finally, AMI can be a friendly source of info for any of the dicasteries or the Pontifical Council on Culture on topics known to their military members which might have applications to other groups: (1) spiritual trauma in firefighters or other public servants; (2) frequent military moves as models for spiritual care for other very mobile groups; (3) obtaining justice in a restricted system as a tiny minority with very limited rights; (4) how military discipline and camaraderie help large groups live in refugee-like environments; etc. By its very international character, and its nearly 50 year history, AMI can be a resource distilled from a variety of national experiences to assist the Pontifical Council up build the Kingdom of God—through the living witness of military laity faithfully living out the apostolic duty.

That is the message, modern and actual, fifty years later!