

MMI supporters weekend

Context

During the AMI conference in Vught, the Netherlands, in September 2016, I was invited to deliver a Catholic Contribution to the supporters weekend of Military Ministries International (MMI) organized at April February 11th and 12th. The theme of the Conference was 'Military Ministry in a Changing world'. During the weekend attention would be given to the sub theme 500 years of Reformation. My contribution was about the sub theme; it came along with a Protestant and an Eastern Orthodox contribution. I was asked to present a Catholic approach of the Bible and what it has to tell to military.

Organization of the Conference

The organization of the conference was perfect, at least from the point of view of a lecturing guest. I was addressed very timely, both about the theme and about the organization. Once I arrived I received a warm welcome. Informal contacts were easy to get during the conference; MMI took good care not to leave me alone feeling isolated. It was made clear that it was highly appreciated that a representative of AMI (such is how I was considered; I am 'only' a theological advisor did attend the MMI supporters weekend. Of course, in my case, I was not invited as a Catholic military. MMI, like AMI is organization of (active or post active) military. But as it is in AMI, a contribution from an academic theologian who is acquainted with military and their chaplains was appreciated.

Sub- theme Bible and the Military

The papers about the sub theme 'Bible and the military' were complimentary. The lecturers within the sub theme were invited to a plenary question time in which someone enquired about the appropriate frequency with which one should take Holy Communion. This developed into a quiet exchange of experiences and practices, which partly are quite different between Christian denominations. This was enriching. And it was interesting to discover similarities, specifically between the Catholic and Orthodox approaches.

Community

MMI provides a way of letting coincide - or at least largely overlap- two types of community: the military one and the Christian one. The military one is obvious: all participant share either military experience or the experience of being a spouse of a military. As such the opportunity to share the experiences are welcomed. Like in AMI this is an essential part of the way MMI is a community. The Christian element in it - which is shared by common practice during the meeting, strengthens this. The connection of the two types of communities - a theme I thought about during my stay- might be in the belief in Gods grace: all soldiers present know they need Gods grace. The MMI community is an active one: many members have tasks to fulfill. MMI is substantially more than a steering committee. It is a missionary organization with all of its members made responsible for its mission. As such it fits into a model of what `Catholic tradition calls 'lay apostolate' as in Apostolat Militaire International.

Prayer

During the conference there were a lot of praying sessions, both in the form of praise sessions and in the form of blessing (of the lecturers) and supplications. It is normal practice for MMI publically to ask God's blessing for a speaker, teacher or preacher at a Christian conference. In feedback it appeared that both the content and delivery of the lecture were very much what MMI had hoped for and the exposition of Spiritual Reading, Congregational Hearing, Authoritative Interpretation and Practical Application gave an insight into the precept and practice regarding the place of the scriptures in the Roman Catholic tradition.

In general, the prayers during the prayer meetings were quite recognizable as genuine Christian prayers in an evangelical style. The evangelical style implies quite explicit expressive types of prayers, to bring the life and work of the participants before God. Although there were no prayers that I could not consent to, I missed a more introvert introspective type of prayer, as well as a prayer on the basis of Church traditions (not specifically liturgical prayers, but exemplary prayers

that saints or martyrs like Dietrich Bonhoeffer have shared with us. It can be expected that many members of MMI have a great love of the works, words, poetry and prayers of the heroes of Christian history and would welcome (and promote) such an inclusion in gatherings like this.

Christian spirituality within MMI

The Christian spirituality within MMI is an extravert and expressive one. This is very important in secular times, because, *****if faith is not expressed language-wise in a personal and daring way, it will cease to exist in a secular cultural context. It takes courage to explicitly choose for expressing Christian identity. I have seen the courage, the will and the competence to do it, also in MMI's leadership. In this respect there is a similarity with some so-called 'new movements' in the Roman Catholic Church. Inside AMI these are found in countries like the Philippines or Middle and Eastern European countries. I think there are ways to connect this dimension of spirituality in both organizations in terms of mutual respect and exchange.

******This is a vital message for all Christian confessions. Today secular expression demands complete freedom yet seeks to limit faith to private observation. Christians must reclaim the public square and discuss across confessional and denominational boundaries how to do it!*

The essence of the spirituality within MMI (as far it is homogenous) as I saw it practiced during the weekend, is characterized as Jesus - oriented and unity - oriented. A basic notion is to put Jesus first. The unity in Christ prevails above the differences between the several background denominations.

Not the fact that, but the way in which Jesus is put first in MMI, appeared to me as not completely converging with the Catholic tradition. To be more specific: in this spirituality it might seem that Jesus can be known outside the churches, through the Bible only. Both in the Orthodox tradition and in the Catholic one, Christ is known in the community of believers as body of Christ, along with the Bible, the Eucharist and the (Catholic) sacrament of priesthood. So in a common catholic experience Jesus' presence comes not only to us through the Bible or sermon; instead it is given to us in several forms. The presence of Christ surrounds the Catholic; also in the sense it exists in the Church as a mystical community. A dialogue in these areas may bring the beauty of holiness and the holiness of beauty closer together.

A very strong point in MMI's Christian spirituality as I saw it practiced during the weekend is its orientation towards unity. It tries to end up the process of fragmentation in Christian denominations. In this sense it is truly ecumenical. Unity is sought in central truths of Christian faith: believing in Jesus and His word. So it is based on the quest for minimum consensus beyond denominational borders. Although this is most valuable, I think that representatives of both the Orthodox and the Catholic traditions could add a sense for the mystical dimension of already existing unity to this; in both of these churches unity is seen as pre-existing before the resolving of differences; the community is not primarily constituted by human effort; it is God-given.

Missionary attitude and activity

The presentations during the conference of MMI's missionary activities and of befriend organizations were quite impressive. It was made quite clear that missionary activities - like building up new networks and groups all over the world, which were reported during the weekend are very important to MMI and its sister organizations like AFCU and AMCF. Partly the growth of MMI implies that non-Christian people became a Christian (often in a very courageous way). Sometimes it seemed that a selection process within already existing Christian denominations and communities is made: those members who want to more express themselves are invited. To me, this seemed to be a two-track missionary strategy.

The missionary attitude and practice is something to be envied by AMI. For although AMI is a world wide organization, its zeal as a missionary organization (for apostolate) unfortunately is very limited. This area was explored internally by AMI at Huize Bergen in the context of a wider role with NGO status – see BP and DB synopsis submitted to AMI President and Gen Sec. Perhaps another area for further dialogue as indicated in the Opportunities paragraph below.

Opportunities

For AMI, cooperation with MMI is an opportunity. AMI is - in principle- a worldwide organization, like the Roman Catholic Church. It has opportunities to share in the network of Catholic NGO's, and to share military experience and expertise with the Vatican. On top of that, the Catholic Church provides an elaborated Catholic Social Teaching, which is very fruitful for Catholic Military. These are all opportunities to share with MMI. MMI might gain profit from the elaborated Catholic Social Teaching, which might inspire it as tool for social practice. MMI's model of 'hearing the Gospel-coming into action may be refined through this. On the other hand, AMI can learn a lot about activating its members and about the (optional) participation of spouses in the apostolate. It can also learn in how to take countries 'on board'.

A common problem of AMI and MMI for cooperation on an international level is their monolingual nature. AMI largely has lost contact with traditionally Catholic French and Spanish speaking countries. Because AMI is an official Catholic NGO in a worldwide church, I guess it will be necessary to restore its multilingual nature, when the apostolic spirit will take a future oriented shape.

Conclusions

1. From the point of view of AMI, there is a lot of convergence between AMI and MMI. However, there is no reason to see the two organizations as rivals. Rather I'd see them as complementary. They can learn from each other's strong points and may be soften each other's weaker ones. For AMI it is fruitful to send military, including some officers, to MMI conferences, in order to promote exchange and cooperation at a proper level. This will strengthen AMI as a 'lay' (non-clerical) organization, which it is by nature and statutes.

2. AMI can learn a lot from the missionary style of MMI.

3. The theology implied in MMI's Christian spirituality has a strongly ecumenical orientation. The doctrinal differences behind it are real - I think- but they need not impede exchange and cooperation.

4. When MMI wants to welcome more Catholic soldiers, it may be useful to also widen the styles of praying (without subject present practice to substantial change).

5. As an academic theologian I will be happy to support this cooperation between AMI and MMI, provided this is considered fruitful by both MMI and AMI. Any such commitment cannot replace commitment of soldiers.

Professor Dr. Fred van Iersel

Chair for Religion and Ethics in the Context of the Armed Forces.

Advisor for Christian `ethics to ACOM (AMI Netherlands).