

**AMI Conference 2007**

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### **Spiritual Introduction**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ!

1. This year we hold our annual meeting in the monastery of Mariastein, an ancient and famous place of worship and pilgrimage here in Switzerland. It is a shrine where Mary, the Virgin Mother of God, is venerated in a very special way. The pious legends concerning the origins of this holy place tell us about outstanding experiences of salvation and protection of children who have been saved and protected by Mary in deadly dangers and life threatening accidents. Maybe these legends can even convey to us, as soldiers, a deep spiritual meaning, because soldiers are called to protect and to save, and this is the basic moral reason why they are entitled to carry arms and to use them as a last resort. For many centuries people have come here with their hopes and fears to experience this saving and protecting presence of God's love and mercy granted to us by the constant intercession of the Blessed Virgin. All this is concentrated, in a very special and impressive manner, in the cave beneath this beautiful church which is the centre of worship and veneration of Mariastein. I would recommend you warmly to take your time to visit this site, it is really a place with an outstanding spiritual atmosphere where we can rest in silence and adoration. Especially during a conference like ours, with its dense program, concentrated work and many discussions, some minutes of retreat in silence and prayer can be very fruitful and help us to live our meeting out of a deeper dimension, the encounter with Jesus and His presence in our hearts. Therefore, the celebration of the Eucharist is not merely an accessory of our meeting, but it is our spiritual centre and the fundamental inspiration of all our efforts.

2. Concerning our first conference topic, ecumenism and ecumenical experiences in international missions, I would like to underline the special situation here in Switzerland. This country has developed, as we shall hear more in detail during our conference, regulations concerning the relations between churches and state, but also the coexistence of different Christian churches and communities, resulting in a unique culture of ecumenical relations. The reason for this special situation goes back to the age of Reformation and Counter-reformation, a period of profound conflicts and fierce fighting between the different confessional groups. In the end none of the parties was able to prevail over the other. As a result it was necessary to settle the conflicts and to tolerate one another, even if in the beginning this did not mean that Christians lived in peaceful ecumenical relations as we understand this today. But it did mean that the different religious groups had to develop agreements and legal frameworks, so that everybody could live with the situation without the constant danger of quarrel and even armed conflict. These achievements continue to have a deep impact on both the political culture here in Switzerland – i.e., the way how the relations between church, state and society are organized and functioning - and on the culture of ecumenical relations and cooperation as we see it nowadays. So it will be very interesting to hear more about the history and the present situation of ecumenical relations here in Switzerland and to discuss our findings in view of the ecumenical situation in our own countries, but also in view of our personal experiences and the challenges we are facing in international missions where, as we all know, good ecumenical relations are of utmost importance.

Allow me to add a few remarks of a more fundamental nature. We all are very much aware of the decisive importance ecumenical relations have today. After centuries of separation, mutual condemnation and often even bloody conflicts we have reached a point where we, as Christians, belonging to different denominations, are able to live and to pray together, to understand and to appreciate one another even while differences remain and the full communion

between all Christians and on all levels has not yet been obtained. It is not only a matter concerning the churches and believers, but it is also important in view of the credibility of the Christian message in front of the world. How could we announce the Gospel while treating one another in ways it was common during past centuries on all sides? For us Catholics, the Second Vatican Council has opened up new perspectives in theology and doctrine, and new ways on a practical level: Christians, living together on a daily basis, churches and communities, enjoying fraternal relations and cooperating on many issues. And we are very happy about the developments and achievements obtained by the ecumenical movement during the last decades.

However, many differences and questions remain, sometimes of a fundamental, even essential nature. The field of ecumenical relations today is a highly complex and sensitive issue. We must not forget that the Christian world since the Reformation is split up in a huge number of different churches and denominations, sometimes with very peculiar ways of understanding, celebrating and practicing the faith, especially in the communities that trace their origins back to the age of Reformation. But there are also the Orthodox Churches with their immensely rich and diverse theological and spiritual traditions reaching back to the very beginnings of Christianity. And we are all proud of our own ways to live and to express the faith, and sometimes we have to admit that there are differences touching the heart of being a Christian or of living as a church that are not simply compatible or complementary to one another, but present challenges that need further dialogue.

Therefore, to reach a more perfect unity is not a matter of some years, not even of some decades. And it is also important to see that this issue is not – at least in the understanding of the Roman Catholic Church - a private matter of individual Christians reaching agreements on a personal level. Institutions have a life of their own, and separations that have lasted for centuries and are touching deep existential dimensions cannot be resolved from one day to the other. And the

questions of ecumenism have strong institutional aspects because the Church is a community characterized by very peculiar features of divine and human elements, present in history but transcending time, rooted in God and reaching out to eternity. As Christians we cannot simply neglect questions of truth in our theological and spiritual interpretations of the Gospel and we have to confront challenges of faithfulness to the will of Jesus Christ in founding the Church. Sometimes Christians are inclined to understand ecumenism as the search for the lowest common denominator between the different churches and Christian communities, but this way would not live up to the seriousness of the questions involved and would destroy authentic ecumenical relations by creating a kind of artificial Christianity, maybe out of a post-modern “anything goes” mentality.

So the only way to develop ecumenical relations in view of a more perfect unity between Christians is the way of a patient, sincere and open minded dialogue which on the one hand is full of joy because of the many ways already possible to live and to express the deep unity between believers, and on the other hand humbly acknowledges the still existing differences and questions accepting the theological and spiritual challenges implied.

As I already have mentioned, the impact of ecumenism goes far beyond mere inter-church issues; on the contrary, in the media and in the wider public these questions very often are perceived as vital in view of establishing peace in the world, between nations and cultures. Religions are seen, in this context, as vital, sometimes even decisive contributors to a lasting peace in the world. The understanding of the role of religions in this respect has certainly grown during the last years. And I think the experiences gained by the churches in their mutual ecumenical relations – i.e., living peacefully together, sharing much common ground while not denying differences, and committed to a constant dialogue - can serve as a reason for hope to overcome other religious and cultural conflicts tormenting at present many regions of the world and presenting real dangers for a lasting and just peace we all wish to establish.

3. The second topic of our conference, the International Humanitarian Law, is an excellent example of an issue of common concern and fruitful cooperation for all Christians. The norms and standards enshrined in this international legal Code aim at the protection of the victims of war by limiting the use of force and trying to mitigate the suffering always connected with armed conflicts. To a large extent, the existing regulations are rooted in Christian moral traditions dating back many centuries. Together with the humanistic traditions of the Enlightenment, the normative idea of humanism even in times of war is at the basis of the International Humanitarian Law, which does not only represent a legal, but also an ethical Code of Conduct, functioning as a moral guideline for believers and non believers alike.

We all know very well that it has always been difficult to adhere to and to implement this Code because in the heat of battle and under the pressure of perceived military necessities strong tendencies exist that lead to an erosion of these norms. Especially today, in the situations of present armed conflicts, these tendencies are particularly strong. Many actual conflicts are asymmetric, confronting regular militaries with irregular, guerilla or even terrorist forces whose strategies and tactics openly challenge or simply deny the validity of these humanitarian norms. It is one of the weaknesses of the existing Humanitarian Law of armed conflicts that the norms presuppose the confrontation of regular armies and present difficulties and challenges when applied to present asymmetrical conflicts. Furthermore, very often the norms themselves represent rather broad frameworks that lack strict and exact guidelines, especially concerning the use of force, thus offering a broad spectrum of interpretation. To add to these difficulties, in our western societies we observe strong currents of moral relativism with all its consequences that tend to undermine the validity of moral norms, including those of the Humanitarian Law of armed conflicts, especially in extreme situations and in times of crises.

In view of all this, we have to acknowledge a fundamental challenge for all Christians. From the point of view of our faith, we are obliged to confront and to challenge these tendencies firmly and systematically. The ultimate inspiration for this attitude is the Gospel itself. As Christians we not only confess a higher source of moral obligation in God Himself but we also acknowledge a deeper dimension in each of our fellow human beings, because in them, especially in all who suffer, we discover the face of Christ suffering on the Cross, who identifies Himself with all those who are poor, helpless, wounded, sick or dying.

Therefore, the challenges implied in the implementation of the International Humanitarian Law represent for us as Christians not only a moral but also a religious and a spiritual challenge, touching the very heart of our faith. We could say that the humanitarian norms of armed conflicts represent the endeavour to apply the commandment of love to the terrible and inhuman situation of battle and fighting. Because of the many weaknesses of this moral and legal Code, the basic norms and their humanitarian inspiration deserve our utmost attention and constant care, on a theoretical but even more on a practical level. We need good knowledge: of the moral and legal obligations and of the often difficult and challenging situations arising in armed conflicts, and we need the great moral vision and the humanitarian inspiration of our faith, together with love and patience, so that we are enabled to contribute to the more effective application and further elaboration of the Humanitarian Law, for the sake of all involved in armed conflicts, as authentic witnesses of the Gospel and of the “New Law” of Christ. In this way we as soldiers can help effectively to lessen the sufferings of war, to promote the protection of human dignity even in the midst of armed conflict, and to contribute to reconciliation and to a lasting peace in the world.