



Apostolat Militaire International (AMI)

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Press Release

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AMI General Assembly agrees on intercultural competence to be a key factor of success in (military) missions abroad

International military deployments for peace keeping under the auspices of the United Nations have been hampered by shortcomings in understanding the cultures of indigenous populations. At its General Assembly, the Apostolat Militaire International (AMI), which took place in St. Georgen, Austria, with delegations from 12 nations present, addressed inter-cultural competence from philosophical, theological and military perspectives.

Complemented by delegations' contributions, three invited specialist speakers presented their view on the subject. The philosophical approach, underlined by the theological one, gave an overview at a strategic, theoretical level explaining the

nature of culture, how to understand culture and how to deal with inter-cultural differences. The military approach furnished a more practical view explaining everyday-difficulties on the ground showing how a lack of cultural awareness multiplies the complexity of the task. The assembly agreed to promulgate further the need of inter-cultural competence. This declaration gives an overview on the results of the assembly's work.

In his peace message of 2001, Pope John Paul II. expressed the aspiration of "... a growing hope that relationships between people will be increasingly inspired by the ideal of a truly universal brotherhood."¹ However, he was aware of the difficulties, on the practical level, which the realisation of this hope would have to face. One of these consists of the differences between cultures.

The assembly follows the conclusions of both, the philosophical and the theological speaker, that culture is the actual culmination of a complex historical development process varying from country to country, from religion to religion, from ethnic group to ethnic group. Thus, we understand culture as the unique self-expression of individuals as well as of social groups. Although usually stable, it is not static and may be susceptible to change provided its adherents have an active sense of ownership of, and positively benefit from, the change process. The quality of cultures may be measured "by the commitment to the human cause and by its capacity to promote human dignity at every level and in every circumstance."²

Reaching universal brotherhood needs mutual understanding and respect, openness and first of all the knowledge about other cultures. Recent history shows that improvement in this context is necessary to be successful.

In the AMI Declaration on the Catholic Soldier at the Beginning of the Third Millennium, we stated that "the responsibility for promoting peace and securing stability on the international stage call for a capacity for cooperation e. g. between soldiers from various nations and cultures as well as with police forces and civil institutions, active in re-construction in crisis regions. Depending on the functional or responsibility fields, this demands knowledge of and sensitivity for, the ... cultural ... conditions prevailing in a possible theatre."³

1 Message of his Holiness Pope John Paul II for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace, 1 January 2001

2 Message of his Holiness Pope John Paul II for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace, 1 January 2001

3 The catholic soldier at the beginning of the third millennium – Declaration of the AMI General Assembly on

Since years, we state an increasing number of operations for peacekeeping or even peace enforcement. Driven by multinational organisations such as the United Nations, NATO or the European Union, these operations mostly have taken place in regions far away from the origin / home-country of the military forces engaged.

A soldier in mission abroad will, therefore, find cultures different from his own and with considerable variation from theatre to theatre. Bearing in mind the unique character of each culture, we consider inter-cultural competence to be a crucial for all personnel involved.

As the military on the ground is by no means the only player in theatre, this need is also given for all other players of different competences including those on the strategic and political level. Only if all of them have the same approach and bear in mind the same end-state, success is within reach.

Finally, the guidance given by our specialist speakers leads us to the following conclusions:

To obtain peace or security in a theatre, the military must be aware that it is necessary not to replace a foreign culture with its own, but to understand and respect it.

To achieve this goal, our military needs to be provided with basic knowledge on the cultural heritage and history of the mission area(s), local customs and mentality and skills to communicate with the relevant parties, and with the ability to act in consequence. At the same time, our military must remain aware its own cultural foundations and be able to deal with apparently conflicting demands.

As a catholic, a military should also be aware of the fact that religion is an integral part of almost all cultures likely to be encountered and should therefore be respected.

We appeal to all military personnel, and others in the same theatre of operations, to work towards comprehensive inter-cultural competence in order that human rights and dignity are not compromised.

The **Apostolat Militaire International** (AMI) is a Catholic Association serving the interests and transmitting the views of Catholic armed forces members to their contemporaries, to the general public and to higher authorities in order that Christian ethics might influence policy making and subsequent action in local, national and international affairs.

The Association links organizations and representatives from Europe, North and South America, Africa and Asia.

If you'd like more information about this topic, or to schedule an interview please call Mrs Nelleke Swinkels – van de Vorst, AMI Secretary General, phone: 0031 6 54796857 or e-mail: secretarygeneral@ami-international.org

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