

„Government, Society, Church and Christian Soldiers – reciprocal expectations and demands“

The Soldier´s perspective ((Lecture B)

General Reinhard Kloss, ladies and gentlemen!

Thank you very much for the invitation to join the General Assembly of the Apostolat Militaire International (AMI) here in this beautiful German capital Berlin.

Last night, the German Minister of Defense, Dr. Karl-Theodor Freiherr zu Guttenberg, and the German Chief of Defense, General Volker Wieker, bade farewell to me. I will conclude more than 43 years of service in the Bundeswehr next Thursday, the day after tomorrow. It´s has been truly an honor and I am rather proud to state that my country, the German Army in particular, allowed me to serve our people, NATO and the EU for such a long period of time.

I enjoyed the privilege of command at all possible levels of command, from a cable section, through a gun battery, an Artillery Battalion including a nuclear capable battery, an Armored Brigade close to here in Potsdam, an Armored Division with some 21.000 soldiers as part of the EUROCORPS, an Army Corps of 60.000 including the US 1st Infantry Division (The Big Red 1) and then still stationed in Germany, and finally one of the NATO Land Component Commands in Heidelberg. On deployment, I was COS SFOR, when this mission was comprised of some 55.000 troops. And lately, I handed over as COS SHAPE, the NATO HQ that commands all current NATO operations, in particular ISAF in Afghanistan and KFOR in the Balkans.

In order to even better understand when I talk to our subject, you should bear in mind that I have been active as a layman for more than one decade now within the dioceses of the Roman Catholic Bishop of the Bundeswehr, and I represented the catholic soldiers for 8 years in the Central Committee of the German Catholics. I continue to be a member of this body as a selected person, elected by the other members of that committee.

Well, with this rather personal introduction I should now proceed and talk about the „soldier´s perspective“ and provide you with some personal reflections about reciprocal expectations and demands.

Most of us are Christians, when at a certain point in time we join the service of our respective Army, Air Force, Navy or Marine Corps. In the case of the Bundeswehr it is important to note, that there exists a constitutional right to exercise your belief. The organization, the state in fact is obligated by constitution to grant room and time for this. Since the German people historically mostly have been either catholic or protestant, we find both denominations organized within the Armed Forces, funded by the Ministry of Defense, but, important to note, the chaplains remain completely independent as far as the religious service is concerned. Very different from other militaries they don't carry any military rank. They are available and present at our peacetime garrisons, but probably more important they routinely deploy with our forces into operations. The latter, as important and demanding as it obviously is, creates a number of challenges.

- Given the very limited number of chaplains sustainability of this mission is difficult to match. This could result in stress both to the individual and the organization due to frequent and repetitive deployment obligations.
- Vacancies back home are often a direct consequence, which the families and those not deployed, the so-called team Hotel do not like. Other chaplains have to step in, including those of local, civilian communities, if the chaplain's network operates properly.
- Contingents demand their chaplain(s) to accompany them when deployed. We all know how important the presence and assistance of our chaplains is – not the least, when we sustain losses, soldiers wounded or even killed in action. Many find their church again when deployed and live becomes threatened. Some join the church for the first time and ask to become baptized. In cases like that the presence of a chaplain is vital.

We, and may I say that on behalf of the Bundeswehr, we are extremely grateful to both Churches that they are and remain fully committed to this demanding responsibility. Reciprocally, the demand of us soldiers from government is obvious: sufficient resources are to be made available to enable the churches to maintain the required and desired level of service. The churches in turn have to live up to their obligation to provide qualified and fit personnel for the Armed Forces, which in particular, given the decreasing number of priests, creates a specific problem to our Catholic Bishops. As a soldier I have to insist: It must be done, both at the peacetime garrison and while deployed.

Concerning other denominations like Jewish, Muslim or Orthodox, in Germany we do not have any organized chaplain system, as would be case within e.g. the US, Canadian or Dutch Armed Forces. Interesting to note is as well that both, Turkey and Albania consider themselves as secular and have no chaplaincy at all. But I have understood that there are procedures in place to allow prayer or joining services in a mosque.

Ladies and Gentlemen!

Society nowadays is a difficult animal. Here in my country, in many quarters you would find little public interest as far as the challenges of soldiers of Armed Forces are concerned. In one of his speeches our former President Köhler called this behavior a kind of “friendly disinterest”. One could probably say: There exists a need for an Army similarly as you require a Fire Police in the public environment. Or: They, the soldiers get paid for their duties reasonably well, thus they just got to do their jobs. Soldiers, that is my experience, react extremely sensitive to such manners. After all, the Federal German Armed Forces are constituted as a Parliamentary Army. It is the Federal German Parliament, the Bundestag, that issues the mandates for military missions abroad. Consequently for many of the soldiers, airmen and sailors it is difficult to accept that their service and sacrifice is neither fully honored or well respected, nor really taken serious – soldiers seem to be considered as a normal profession and as such can be easily disregarded. Collectively, we are not successful in explaining to our German people, what the military means, what the specific political, national and Alliance interests are, and we are often neither coherent nor transparent in our joint messaging and information policies. I do firmly believe that this task falls to our politicians in the first place; but similarly to influential lobbyists including our democratic parties and influential Think-Tanks. The Churches are to play an active role in that, as they lobby too; but eventually us, the individual soldiers need to fulfill our obligations as well. We must go out actively and tell our story, become visible in this society and engaged with their members of parliament and the powerful medias of today – measured but informative, true and correct, as well as where necessary demanding – of government and parliament, of society and of the church.

Since all of you, I suppose, are personally and actively engaged as Christian soldiers in your respective Armed Forces formations and nations, I would presume that your activities become visible to your respective societies, governments and our Church. Often, I have experienced that the individual

seems to be looking for personal rewards only. To be more direct, blunt and specific:

Our reward is the work, the care and the engagement for the benefit of others; our colleagues, our families, our peoples, our society. This should be what drives our initiatives and activities: We got to be recognizable as Christian soldiers and must not hide away or guise our belief.

In a society like Germany, consisting of roughly one third Catholics, one third Protestants, a further third of none-believers and a growing number of citizens who are Muslim, we have to explain and be clear what it means, when we say: I am a Christian soldier. The less convincingly we do that, the more irrelevant we will become. I would encourage you not to become frustrated or de-motivated, because of a globalized, individualized, humanistic, or atheistic environment.

Be courageous and persistent, if required aggressive to some point, make your position understood and insist upon your rights.

Of course, you will have to remain consistent. Our Christian values and belief, which I will not detail here, are the benchmarks of my and your engagement, of our conduct, of our way of life, of our personal discipline and our commitment. Here as well, we have to be recognizable. It is my experience, that people generally respect this. If you are murky and shy, you might lose this respect. Others will most likely continue to move on and not care about that weak and weary Christian. But we are convinced that our belief is extremely strong. When rightly lived and explained, who would dare to overthrow us a lively community? Together, we are strong. Together, we can be successful.

Let me conclude with again some more personal reflections.

As soldiers we have to give orders or obey those given to us. The effect of either is: We are to act! It is then the legal environment, our training and education, the serious reflection of the ethics of war and the ethics of soldiers, which in most cases would provide sufficient orientation and foundation. But, we all know, be it in theory or from practical experience, that there exist situations where acting into uncertainty is required, expected and demanded of us. I suppose, we could all agree, that we would always do our utmost to conduct a mission justly and honorably. However, if unintentionally wrong or mistaken, in particular if one had to kill or order to kill, then we Christian soldiers know that there exists an eternal power, our Lord, who would give mercy to us. I can share my

wrongdoing and guilt in prayers with him, and I know that in most cases he would keep his promise for forgiveness and render mercy.

We soldiers impact on other people. Often, our actions use physical power, deadly force and destructive weapons. And it is because of this reality, that, irrespective of what we do or don't do, requires a legal, an ethical and a moral foundation. We get educated and trained, many deepen their knowledge through private studies, and we repetitively exercise and drill this as pre-deployment training. Consequently there emerges trust and confidence with respect to our own abilities, that of our superiors and colleagues, both nationally and in a multinational environment. This kind of trust certainly will enable us to sustain even the most critical situations in combat missions.

It is particularly true, and I assume the same applies to all of you, that, since I was brought up in a Christian family and became a Christian myself, my knowledge of the Lord's commandments and rules provides me with the freedom of action and a certainty to do things right in most cases. For us it is clear, evident and obvious that the Lord's commandments come first, human laws and legislation come second. He has handed this world over to us and we have an obligation to treat it with respect and responsibility. We are responsible to him. Finally he will be the one to judge our deeds. So, if as soldiers we have to apply force, deadly force in particular, we must remind ourselves of this (Christian) reality. To state it again, as Christian soldiers we can built on God, and because of that we are enabled to act in a measured, certain, trustful and responsible way. I would hope, that we can always conduct missions and give orders in such a manner. And, this hope I firmly put to the Lord.

Ladies and Gentlemen, what I have tried to express, is my conviction that we should not only remain in the role of a "demandeur", demanding from society, the government, the Heads of our Armed Forces, the media or the Alliance. As Christian soldiers we possess and know of a caring and driving force that provides faith and comfort. And it is just that what others, which we serve, may rightly demand of us.

Thank you very much for your attention and I am happy to engage any questions or remarks.