

Your excellencies, generals, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to be with you today and speak about the commitment of the Roman Catholic Church to the well-being of the armed forces. 'Government, Society, Church, and Christian soldiers – reciprocal expectations and demands' is our topic.

I come from a country where 90% of the population has no affiliation with a religious denomination. Catholicism is the largest religious group, followed by Muslims, and then Protestants. In the Netherlands we have a professional army. Only a small part of our young people are still members of a denomination. However, this also means that they are very much open to existential and spiritual questions, as I myself experienced during a visit to Bosnia in the beginning of my time as military bishop. The military has extremely high expectations of these young people, especially during deployment. This always leads to existential questions.

In our Chaplaincy we have a large number of chaplains who are laymen and deacons, and only a small number of priests. This is a rather unique situation, which has advantages and limitations. Laymen may reach out more easily to young soldiers and be as it were a bridge to priests. Since military service involves the total human person, this gives our work a new missionary dimension. Some time ago one of our chaplains – a deacon – baptized three Dutch soldiers in Uruzgan.

Due to recent affairs the credibility of the church has been damaged. Also the chaplaincy itself has perceived the need to change, for many reasons. I will now present this to you on the basis of the Dutch notion of the separation of church and state.

In the Netherlands we have a tradition of tolerance and religious freedom, which means the right for all to live according to their own beliefs. It has to be admitted however that the traditional Dutch model of tolerance is no longer self-evident. More and more people are advocating a stricter separation of Church and State after the French example of *laïcité*. As a consequence, religious organizations are challenged to make their contribution to society more transparent. This, of course, also applies to the military chaplaincy. It is a challenge we gladly accept.

But there is also a tendency in the opposite direction. Nowadays we see all kinds of initiatives where there is an unproblematic and effective cooperation between government bodies and faith-based groups. To give an example from outside the military: many clergy are nowadays getting involved in municipal calamity response plans, to reassure people by their presence, and to provide a continuity of support from a familiar circle around victims.

The Dutch model as it is now, is based on the conviction that Church and the State can and should co-operate in the interest of both parties. The one thing to keep in mind is that the different parties – Church and State – ultimately have different responsibilities. These responsibilities may touch each other or overlap with each other, but they cannot be reduced to one another. So it is always necessary to make a careful distinction.

In the military chaplaincy this works out as follows. Chaplains are civil servants, paid by the state, but operating under the authority of their own Church or other type of community, represented by a Chief Chaplain. In the past, this arrangement has sometimes led to unclear responsibilities or even to chaplains losing sight on all lines of accountability at all.

Therefore an effort has been made to clarify the different lines of ac-

countability and try to implement the same in the co-operation with our colleagues of other faiths.

We have set this out the division of responsibilities as follows:

1. Chaplains have a professional loyalty both to the Church, that endorses them, and to the Military (Ministry of Defence) that hosts them, pays for them and supports them. Chaplains have to balance these different loyalties. It is precisely this double loyalty that allows chaplains to make care for soldiers their first priority, because they cannot be instrumentalized by any demand from the military organization, for example, readiness for deployment. If this happens, the church can and will speak up for its chaplains.
2. The relationship between Chaplains and their host institution – the military – is based on trust. This is the more so, because Chaplains have so much freedom. Even though, as I just said, care for soldiers is the Chaplains' first priority, maintaining and preserving the trust of the institution comes a good second.

As an aside to this point: many people nowadays insist that for every citizen, the state and the law should always be his or her first loyalty. I believe this view is seriously misguided. Since we live in free societies, it is evident that it is up to any citizen to put his first loyalty wherever he or she wishes – as long as the law is held in honour. We all know that as Catholics, we should obey and follow our conscience, which is informed by the teaching of the Church, and secondly by what is held good in society – human rights, respect for the individual, etc. The law should not force people against their conscience.

3. The Church has a shared responsibility to be a good employer – or, to make sure the Ministry of Defence is a good employer. This is not so much about money. It is about Chaplains having the means and facilities do their work properly. This means, in short – access to soldiers, anywhere and any time it is necessary for them; open co-operation with other care workers, commanders and higher authorities, based on a thorough understanding of each other's roles, possibilities and limitations.

These three points are the key to the involvement of the Church in the military chaplaincy (and other sectors of ministry). I think they are important, not only from a practical point of view, but also from a spiritual point of view. There is no valid reason why we, as Christians, should not embrace clear lines of accountability. In fact, they create the freedom to carry out our ministry. The practice of pastoral care in the present age demands accountability and awareness of norms and practices in other disciplines.

We, as a Church, should embrace and stimulate what is good and valuable. To give one example: some of you may know that norms of good professional practice are nowadays informed by considerations taken from human rights law. Key elements are protection of the personal life sphere of the individual and the right to take his own decisions about his life. Needless to say, this raises interesting questions about the autonomy of the individual, as it is called, but these are beside our topic. My point is, since the Church also seeks to further and promote human rights, it is natural we should try to learn from them as much as we can. Human rights are, as it were, a transition category, where the values of society and of the Church meet. At the same time it is true that the faith of the Church is also a foundation of human rights. The Church can

make explicit the eternal foundation for human rights, with which the secular mind has a problem. Nations of different ideologies could agree in 1948 that they are important, but not why they are important. The Church offers a foundation, and for this reason it can also present arguments to prevent their devaluation.

So Chaplains could and should benefit from norms of good practice as they have been developed by 'lay' professions in personnel care. But also we can learn from the interfaith setting of our work. In the Netherlands, co-operation with different faiths is a necessity. In fact, the staff of our Chaplaincy has found the co-operation with colleagues of other faiths (Muslim, Jewish, and Hindu) in many cases very inspiring and indeed an incentive to deepen their own Catholic faith. These people work on the basis of strong convictions and are never tempted by relativism or vagueness, but they have a sharp eye and a warm heart for the needs of soldiers – exactly as I like to see in the Chaplains of my service. This example also shows why I believe sector ministry is an area that can give inspiration to the Church, both to seek renewal and to face the questions of today. Such as the question how people of different faiths or none can live and work together harmoniously.

Let me go into this a little further. As the Netherlands is a very egalitarian society, we do not have one Chaplain General – we have six Chief Chaplains with the rank of Colonel. In our board there are representatives of protestant and catholic christianity, three so-called minority religions and secular humanism. Of course, on the level of content there is little or no agreement possible. What we are seeing, however, is that at the level of organizing and running a complex organization, all six – depending on the topic under discussion – may sometimes be a little out of their depth, but nevertheless they succeed rather well in agreeing. In this

I believe there is much potential for the further development and strengthening of chaplaincy as a profession. Also it shows the necessity of tolerance, of which I spoke earlier. It presupposes strong convictions, but also, equally strong respect to the convictions of others.

But of course, even though matters of organization and co-operation are important, the church also has deeper motives to feel this concern for the military, and they have a spiritual and theological character. They are as it were imbedded in the nature of the Church as an ecclesiastical community. These underlying motifs I will now present to you, as the inner motivation for committed Catholics to care for the well-being of those in the forces.

As Bishop to the Armed forces, I have made a consistent attempt to reach out to Catholic soldiers, their families and of course to the chaplains who care for them. As time allowed I have made visits to Dutch soldiers on deployment, for example in Iraq, where we visited Abraham's birthplace, the city of Ur of the Chaldees. The Holy Eucharist we celebrated together in Abraham's house on an altar made of an empty ammunition box was one of the most memorable of my life.

With the Chaplains of the Catholic chaplaincy, I have visited the Nazi transit camp in Amersfoort, a city in the middle of the Netherlands. In our celebration of the Eucharist we remembered the terrible deeds that have taken place there, but also recalled the signs of hope: such as the blessed Fr Titus Brandsma, a Carmelite father, a professor and a courageous journalist. He was imprisoned in Amersfoort for a month before he was sent on to Dachau, where he died. While he lived, he remained a source of encouragement and comfort to his fellow prisoners. Our peo-

ple, chaplains, visit the Amersfoort camp regularly with groups of young soldiers in training.

Now I would like to address where and how our motivation to care for soldiers is grounded in our faith.

The first reason for our care is the pastoral responsibility the Church feels for its faithful – its baptized members. It is a pastoral responsibility that ultimately lies with the military Bishop. In practice, it lies at a lower level, that of the chaplain or team of chaplains. What it means is that all those who are baptized members of the Church have a right to its pastoral care, especially and most of all in difficult circumstances, where they may be cut off from the Church community. It does not matter if they are practising Christians or not; as long as they are baptized they remain part of our community.

The Church is very much aware of this responsibility. But it would be a serious mistake to assume that the Church cares only about its own. In the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, the bishops gathered at the Second Vatican Council emphasized clearly that ‘the joys and hopes, the sorrows and fears of all men of our age, especially of the poor or those in some way hurt, are also those of the disciples of Christ.’ It is an important text to quote. It could even be read as a summary of the intention of the whole Council in one sentence. But to make this very clear: we care for all, but have a responsibility for some: our own, the Catholic faithful in special circumstances.

Obviously, ‘special circumstances’ applies to all in the Armed Forces. Our young men and women are placed in a structure that is unpredictable in its actions and beyond their control. It may put them at risk of hurt or injury, or even of death. Their normal support networks such as

friends and family, as well as church communities, are often far away or unable to understand what they are experiencing. Within the military organization they are under orders, with limited rights and freedoms. They are dependent on political mandates and decisions that may or may not fit the situation they find themselves in. In these circumstances they sometimes need to use or are confronted with deadly violence, which in itself goes against human nature. After service, they may be stigmatized by a society that wants to turn its back on a mission that is publicly associated with loss and failure. We all know that service in the forces can also create all sorts of tensions and problems, moral, personal, psychological and ethical. Take the example of Srebrenica in 1995, when young soldiers were forced to stand aside when faced with a genocide. Some veterans of this mission have even gone so far that they have taken their own lives. This alone establishes care for veterans as an essential issue for our time.

Some of these issues the military care system can solve, but not all. Also, there is always the likelihood that some people will fall through the mazes of the net. If this happens, not only the military fails – we fail, too. We, that is, our society, our national community and also, we as a church community. Therefore, the Church relies on Chaplains to help preserve the integrity of our ecclesial community, which we believe is the people of God on earth. Our ideals of solidarity, compassion, and mutual love should hold and bear fruit especially here, where people need it most.

There is more. The Church is motivated to help and be present among the military, because of its calling to service. The Church is missionary in its nature, and part of its mission is to serve. Its desire to serve is strengthened by the knowledge that it has something valuable to offer. Because of its spiritual tradition and its basis in Scripture, it has rich

sources of wisdom and comfort at its disposal, that can be applied in the care for soldiers of all ranks in according to their capabilities.

Confident in this tradition, the Church considers itself to be an 'expert in humanity', in the words of Pope John Paul II. The witness of its saints, the message of Scripture, the wisdom of the monastic tradition, and the practical experience put forth by centuries of authors on spiritual development all contribute to our practice of pastoral care. It is profoundly non-utilitarian, but directed to the growth and well-being of individuals as persons in their multiple relationships as none other. Even though its effects are hard to measure in statistical terms, I believe the level of expertise we apply in our type of care is at least as high as that offered by other care workers. Chaplains can bring this experience to soldiers. Even if they do not share the christian faith, they can be challenged by it to define what for them is truly valuable and meaningful.

A beautiful quote of Pope Benedict XVI from his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, can very well be applied to Chaplaincy to illustrate this point:

Those who practise charity in the Church's name will never seek to impose the Church's faith upon others. They realize that a pure and generous love is the best witness to the God in whom we believe and by whom we are driven to love. A Christian knows when it is time to speak of God and when it is better to say nothing and to let love alone speak.

But from this encyclical there is another phrase I would like to highlight:

For this reason, it is very important that the Church's charitable activity maintains all of its splendour and does not become just another form of social assistance.

In fact the German is much more illuminating, as it speaks about 'Leuchtkraft'. Together, these texts explain well the balance we seek be-

tween carrying out our work selflessly and letting the love of Christ shine through, a love that is eternal and establishes in man an eternal dignity.

Lastly, we – the Church – care for the military because we care about the tasks they are set to fulfil. The Church cares for justice and peace in the world, as the annual World Peace Day messages of the Pope testifies. It cares for the ‘international rule of law’. It cares for a sustainable future of humanity, and especially for the poor. It cares for a universal vision and for understanding between the nations and the peoples. This is how and why the church has the interests of all humanity at heart. The past decade offers little confidence that these ideals of peace, security, human rights and prosperity for all, which twenty years ago seemed attainable goals, can be reached any time soon. In fact, year by year they come to seem more remote.

Since our hope is founded in the promise of our Lord, let us not be afraid to name the challenges we face. Our politicians and institutions lose credibility, political decision-making gets more and more tangled, the strain on bureaucracy and well-meaning people increases beyond manageable levels. Under these circumstances, Church tradition offers criteria that may help to discern ethical dimensions of our reality. (Of course, these criteria themselves may be questioned, but at least they offer a possible starting point for reflection).

The Just War doctrine may be a good example of this. It forces us to ask the questions implied in the ‘ius ad bellum’, the ‘ius in bello’, and, in its recent elaboration, the ‘ius post bellum’. A young Dutch theologian and hopefully a future Reserve Chaplain has described the evolution of the teaching of Pope John Paul II on the Just War doctrine in his MA thesis, studying these messages and the late Pope’s speeches to the diplomatic

corps in the Vatican. Reading back on his trenchant and well-founded objections to the wars in the Persian Gulf, which have caused so much misery to the people of Iraq (and let us not forget about its Christian minorities) as well as the wider region, and so many casualties to the British and US armed forces, one really does wish the leaders of the western world had listened to his voice more attentively.

As I just said, Just War theory can be challenged. But it does offer a possible and well-tried starting point for ethical reflection; it helps us to connect the doubts and uncertainties of our present age to exceptional thinkers that have gone before us and that have used the same model. One cannot measure military matters only to outcome; ethics is not mathematics.

With this I would like to conclude my presentation. I had planned to speak some words about Afghanistan but we will keep that for the discussion.