



## **Lecture B: *Dialogue of life between chaplains, soldiers and their families (European Perspective)***

**Major General Norbert Sinn, Austrian Army**

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Manansala B Hall, Sulo Riviera Hotel

Quezon City, Philippines

### **Lecture Highlights**

Major General Norbert Sinn's lecture advanced some insights about the European perspective in how chaplains relate to soldiers and their families. He first discussed factors and developments in the European society that affect soldiers and families, e.g. demographics (low birth rate, in the face of which Europe needs immigration but at the risk of absorbing immigrants and coping, in particular, with immigrants from Islamic countries); economic problems; and issues of identity and family relationships that impact on the armed forces (affected by decline of moral values; and widespread permissiveness in European societies); and socio-political differences in European countries (i.e. Northern & Southern Europe; Western & eastern Europe).

He then described the European militaries which are actually made up of national militaries that have close cooperation within NATO and the EU. These armed forces are currently engaged in several international deployments. As a consequence, the European militaries are going in the direction of all-volunteer forces. These organizations are also burdened by massive cost-cutting programs and the demands of professional and personal mobility among members that directly and indirectly put stress in the family lives of the soldiers. In turn, the relationship of the military with religion follows the general trend in Europe towards highly secularized societies and religious pluralism, religion being increasingly treated as a private matter, thus weakening the practice of the traditional church activities and lessening adherence to churches as institutions.

On the other hand, the military pastoral services in most European states are based on firm legal provisions, even if there are differences on account of national legal systems. These offer challenges and opportunities at the same time. One challenge is the difficulty of building up a Christian community as soldiers often live more with civilian parishes than with military pastoral services and in most garrisons in Austria there is no Sunday Mass. In addition, contact with the soldiers' families is now a pastoral challenge as family situations often become difficult during deployments of military parents, occasionally resulting in serious problems, even divorces. On the other hand, many European armies have Christian lay organizations active in caring for soldiers and helping to build up Christian communities within the Armed Forces. In Austria there is the "**Arbeitsgemeinschaft Katholischer Soldaten**" (**AKS**) that cares for military families, especially during deployment of a parent and also after return at home. It likewise cooperates with the chaplains in their pastoral service. AKS also provides Information about the Christian faith and Christian values in the military, formation and education.

General Sinn concluded on the need to pursue various initiatives such as those of the AKS and highlighted the Project: "Building communities of soldiers," in which military parishes are turned into (temporary) "homes" for Austrian soldiers.

### **Open Forum**

The questions during the Open Forum covered the state of integration of immigrants and inclusion of spiritual education in military curricula. Gen Sinn stated that the issue of immigrant integration is mixed. Some immigrants integrating well into the larger society while others tend to band with their own ethnic groups, choosing even to stick to speaking their native language, which makes things difficult for their adoptive communities.

On the second issue, all military laws, he said, are more or less based on Christian values so it is not that difficult to teach ethics. There are priests who are allowed to teach and participate in the educational formation of young cadets. There is also a primary school, the Theresiana Military Academy, which allows priests to impart Christian teachings as part of early moral values formation. In Germany, however, the separation of church and state forbids religion to be taught to soldiers. Military training institutions there have programs, which are limited only to ethics which are taught by chaplains.

One comment given during the Open Forum was on the perception that too much emphasis may have been given on chaplains and priests to do all the work. In Britain, this is problematic because Catholics number less than 10% of the population.

Another point made was on the seeming fragmentation of the Christian faith vis-a-vis the increased vigor in other religions. Gen Sinn remarked that while some Christian students would now skip or leave religious classes, some Muslims have even shown interest in attending Catholic lessons. There are hopeful signs, though, among many young Catholics that they are more interested in what is black or white (right or wrong), and that in France, there is new movement that promotes Christian values.