



Association of Catholic Soldiers in Austria (ACS)

To the Catholic Military Bishops
and the members and friends of the
Apostolat Militaire International (AMI)

Honoured ladies and gentlemen,

The Association of Catholic Soldiers in Austria, on the occasion of the 2012 AMI Conference, has developed the comments below, i.e. “Commemoration of the Fallen” and “Overcoming the Fear of Death with the Strength of Belief”, and has the pleasure of submitting them to the Conference:

Christian and Military Mortuary Culture Questions and Food for Thought

Preliminary remarks:

The Church and the military are two autonomous domains: not every soldier necessarily is part of the Church, and certainly not all those who are baptised serve in the military. Military chaplaincy, first of all, addresses the soldiers who want to live their Christian faith under the terms of military service. Secondly, it considers itself to be the advocate also of the members of other religions or philosophies of life, so that they can also practise their religion freely.

Today, it can be noticed that traditional rituals are fading into the background. Moreover, the prevailing desire for individual self-realisation in our society has led to a search for new rituals. The Church and the military, however, are conservative when it comes to the form, so that some things, which are not understood, are conducted in a very formal manner, with increasing pressure of correctness (since the content is less and less understood) and ever-growing detailed explanations (such as in sermons, speeches and introductory remarks).

Is there still a need for the Christian and the military mortuary cultures today?

What is the case with the Christian and the military mortuary cultures? Is there still culture left? The Christian and the military mortuary cultures still have their right of existence today, which stems from its providers. The state and the military can handle this more freely, because they are not based on transcendence (such as through revelation or other divine acts). The church, however, has to make allowance to the fact that it has to proclaim the gospel credibly in every situation. As long as this is possible and feasible with the military commemoration of the dead, it also is a legitimate, if not obligatory, part of the commemoration of the dead. The Christian and the military mortuary cultures are rooted

- as a memento that the soldier died in the service of his fatherland, i.e. for the benefit and the continuation of his society;
- as a means of saying thanks for the sacrifice made;
- as an expression of respect and esteem;
- as a token of love as well as
- as a means of coping with grief – for the family, the comrades and other people close to the deceased.

Those killed in action deserve our particular respect and consideration, because it is they who were killed or suffered a fatal accident for the benefit of the community of the people and the state. Christian-oriented soldiers express this mainly through prayers for the fallen and by interceding with God, which should be an intrinsic part of

the military ritual. In this way, the procedure may be carried out as a prayer, similar to liturgy.

This has to apply also when a soldier evades service by committing suicide. Dealing with suicide certainly is an all but minor problem for military units. Farewell from the comrades must be granted, just like the military funeral or the commemoration of the dead. Independent of the reasons for the suicide, the dead soldier's body deserves respect.

Whether a religious funeral can be held depends on the respective religion or the deceased person's last will.

The problem is that the soldier's profession moves more and more towards the periphery and is regarded as a necessary evil, and, therefore, the commemoration of the dead is increasingly privatised. Society, however, needs to make aware that career soldiers are part of our society and fight, and are killed, by order of our society. With his commitment the soldier makes a free, self-determined and prosperous life possible. For this, he is willing to put his life at risk – a mark that distinguishes him.

Is it necessary to change tradition and rituals of the commemoration of the dead?

In principle, there is no necessity for changing traditional functions, like wreath-laying ceremonies on All Soul's Day, memorials for the comrades killed in action, functions to honour soldiers killed on duty, international memorials (the Tyrol Provincial Military Command, for example, invites soldiers of the German Bundeswehr to commemorate together in a ceremony). In general, the traditional associations, i.e. the Austrian Comradeship Association and the Black Cross, which looks after war graves, are involved as major supporters of such commemorations.

The need for change, however, can be noticed insofar as the traditional commemorations of the dead in the above-mentioned functions only focus on soldiers of the First World War. Although soldiers killed in action or on duty are buried with all honours in the Christian-military tradition, they increasingly get out of the focus of

the state, the community, etc. The reason for this might be that the population hardly considers international operations as necessary and views career soldiers more as mercenaries, because they are active on a voluntary basis. Thus, at war memorials and in the churches in Austria, you will hardly find any memorial plaques, expressing the commemoration of those recently fallen or deceased in the course of international or domestic operations. Particularly the youths bear little relation to the victims of the two world wars – they do, however, to those killed on the Golan Heights, in Cyprus, Lebanon, etc.

Although there may well be a need to change the rituals – i.e. where the young do not sense the meaning and want to contribute their own ideas. Existing ceremonies, protocols, parade structures and drill regulations, etc. should, therefore, allow for flexibility and should not be followed to the letter. These changes are not about changing traditions altogether, but about adapting traditions to modern thinking. In addition, it has to be ensured that the Christian-military commemoration of the dead becomes a concern of the respective population, state, city or community. After all, it is on their behest that the soldiers to be honoured put their lives at stake. Memorials should also serve as *manifestations for peace* and emphasise that wars must not happen any more.

Commemoration of the dead in a non-Christian or multi-denominational environment
Should the deceased not have been a religious person or lacked a religious environment or should he not have wanted a religious commemoration, the state has to step in, taking care of the dignified treatment of the corpse, i.e. its transport, laying out and farewell. In funeral speeches, certain elements in the life of the deceased and his duty-related achievements may be addressed, which is quite common even today, without referring to a possible afterlife.

When soldiers of a unit, who died in the same operation, in the same line of duty or at the same time, adhere to different denominations, each of them is to be buried as prescribed by their respective religion. As appropriate, the Catholic soldier has to help religious minorities so that they can realise their respective form. Organising a

common religious-military ceremony, however, is hardly possible, unless only Christian confessions are involved. In such cases the commemoration of the dead should confine itself to the military aspect only and the religious part should take place after the transfer to the home country. A purely military, non-religious ceremony could be an important sign of overarching, particularly towards Muslims.

Overcoming the fear of death with the strength of belief

In the secular world, fear and the fear of death as well as overcoming them belong to the field of psychology, which offers a variety of methods and strategies to overcome it. Psychology makes believe that every situation can be controlled with its help if only the patient goes along. With God nobody has to just “go along“! For God ”Thy faith hath saved thee“ is enough. We know from reports that this is happening on present deployments, in particular from soldiers who fought in the two World Wars and those who currently fight in Iraq and Afghanistan and who used to pray very often.

To which extent faith and prayer are helpful in overcoming the fear of death and which preconditions should be there to do so, is part of the considerations presented below, concluding with a suggested a prayer.

The power of faith when caught by terror of death

Deployed humans and, particularly, soldiers, who believe in God, have derived substantial strength from their faith and prayer to overcome mortal terror in critical situations. Prayer and thinking of God also help humans and soldiers who otherwise do not admit that they are faithful Christians. Examples from the Second World War, but also from current international operations, show us that soldiers started praying when they feared that their death was imminent and, thus, experienced a beneficial effect. Be that a quick prayer to heaven in an extreme situation or a longer-lasting dangerous situation, praying is often described as beneficial. At the latest when the first casualty has to be mourned in an operation, the soldiers find their way to faith; this is clearly proved in operational documents – also in former Eastern Bloc countries, where numerous soldiers are undenominational.

It is, therefore, relevant not only to prepare the soldiers in the field of ethics in the course of operations preparation, but also to give them the opportunity of a Christian-religious preparation. Accordingly, obligatory “science of life lessons“ during normal duty at home are to be called for, for all soldiers, including career personnel. In the German Bundeswehr these lessons have long been a matter of course, being taught by the military chaplaincy on the basis of clear guidelines.

Believers orient their lives in their entirety in a completely different way. This is a major reason why prayers spoken for oneself and others have such an impact. Catholic soldiers must, therefore, not hold back. They have to find ways to live their faith while fulfilling their everyday military routine, testify to their faith, i.e. by setting examples, and contribute their share among the other soldiers. This requires talking to commanders and superiors and inviting colleagues to Christian functions and prayers. Particularly in situations of imminent death, praying together is essential, led by a Catholic soldier or commander. Showing that the others are not alone in their belief is in itself a great help and supports them.

Looking for God during operations

Looking for God during operations and finding Him to give us hope is no easy undertaking, calls for His mercy and, especially in situations when there is the danger of death, demands continuous personal struggle for belief in Him.

Celebrating the Holy Communion together is the central and most important source of power. Priests and pastors thus have to help inspire their fellow soldiers – already during everyday duty and not as late as during an operation or even in a dangerous situation.

Talking with our comrades also helps in the search for God to give us hope, when we look for counsel, share our sorrows, learn from the experiences with faith of others and read the Holy Bible together or pray. Ensuring this is, in itself, not the military pastor’s task, but principally the task of all Catholic soldiers who want to take on this task

Praying for the enemy

Ultimately, the Christian soldier faces the question of “praying for the enemy”. “Love your enemies,” says Jesus Christ. At first glance such a request may seem to ask too much: Praying for somebody, of all people, who is responsible for causing one’s own fear of death! This, however, would be the case only if the prayer asked for the enemy to prevail. A prayer for the enemy should be a prayer of supplication: supplicating, for example, that

- the situation be overcome,
- the conflict be dissolved,
- peaceful solutions be found, and
- that God assist also the enemy and have mercy on their fallen.

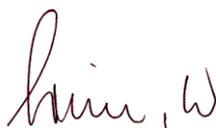
Proposed prayer:

Lord, help me in this difficult time, For only You can turn every plight into something good. Give me strength. Oh God, I trust in you.
Lord, let my actions contribute to peace. Help me preserve the respect for my enemy. Help us resolve this conflict with only few victims to be mourned. Stand by me in faith and let me not doubt in You. Amen

SEEBENSTEIN, in April of 2012

On behalf of the Association of Catholic Soldiers in Austria:

The president:



Major General Norbert Sinn