



General Assembly of the AMI 2013

Report of the AMI President

Celje, September 9, 2013

Your Excellencies, Generals, Ladies and Gentlemen – dear friends and comrades of our AMI family!

Starting my opening speech, I want to warmly welcome you here in the „Dom Svetij Jožef Celje – Lazaristi“.

At the beginning let me thank our Slovenian friends for their excellent preparations, their hospitality and cooperation.

Especially I want to express my gratitude to Vicar General Monsignore Dr. Jože PLUT and the Chief of General Staff, Brigadier General Dobran Božic, for rendering the necessary support to the conference, and also chaplain Milan Pregelj, who at least took the responsibility for all internal organizational work and the organisation of our cultural programme and the ladies programme, too.

Let me first have a short glance at our last year's conference:

We held our conference somewhere in the „(poppy) fields of Flanders “ in Retie, a beautiful small town approximately one hour away from Antwerp, about which we learned when visiting the town, the Houses of Parliament, the harbour and the National Maritime Museum. We learned a lot about history and current questions. Not surprisingly for me, I met in the city hall of Antwerp a good old fellow on a wall painting, called Maximilian I, the Last Knight, the empire of whom in those days also included the Netherlands and Belgium.

Poem by Major John McCrae : In Flanders fields

In Flanders fields the poppies blow Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly

Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.

Your Excellencies, Military Bishop Andre Leonhard and Vicar General van den Eeckhout! Thank you once again for inviting us and all the contributions given by the Belgian Armed Forces and the Military Vicariate.

No surprise therefore that also Slovenia was connected to, and integrated in, the Austro-Hungarian Empire until 1918.

For all new delegations allow me to introduce my deputies and myself: Colonel Michael Jedlicka and WO II Markus Stromberger.

I myself am accompanied by my wife Ida, we are starting these days our 41st year of marriage.

I am proud to tell you that I am in a position to carry out my duty in explicitly full support of the Austrian Military Bishop, HE Christian Werner. He is sending his best regards and, if possible, will join our conference tomorrow or Wednesday, depending on the situation.

My presidency is supported by my Netherlands Secretariat General, headed by Nelleke Swinkels van de Vorst as my SecGen, her deputy, the former Chief Chaplain for the Royal Netherlands Army, Jan van Lieferloo, and the treasurer Herman Vriesema. His spouse Ans accompanies Herman.

As you know already, the AMI strives to promote the establishment of the Christian view of military life and its values;

to foster international understanding and cooperation as a means of building up world peace; in the light of the Gospel and the teaching of the Church to address spiritual, ethical, moral and social issues of specific relevance to military life.

This is the principle of our community and with this in mind, I feel obliged to invest all my energy and my full commitment during my AMI presidency.

I am really happy to welcome again so many delegations and representatives from all over the world. I appreciate very much that delegations from 12 countries are in attendance of this conference.

A warm welcome to:

Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Gambia, Germany, Great Britain, Kenya, the Netherlands, Nigeria, the Philippines, Slovakia, Slovenia and the United States of America.

Again, it's a great honour for us that Bishop Moth from Great Britain is with us. Thank you very much for working, praying and laughing with us.

Bishop Rabek is sending his regrets, as he is otherwise engaged. He has to travel to Rome this week.

After all this introductory remarks let me come to the essence of this year's conference.

Under the general motto

„The Christian Soldier in the Service of Just Peace. To live authentically according to the Word of God and to spread the Gospel“ we have chosen the theme

„2013 – New Understanding of Vaticanum II“

Given our main topic „Soldier in the Service of Just Peace“, it seems more than logic to focus on Vaticanum II.

Not all of us, but some, remember the surprise, when Pope John XXIII announced after the holy mess on January 25, 1959 his strong will to organize and lead a twofold project: a diocesan synode for Rome and a general consilium, then called the second Vatican Council.

Pacem in Terris was presented on April 11, 1963, while *Gaudium et Spes* came to the light of the world in 1965 at the end of the Consilium.

„Peace starts within ourselves!“, was one of the decisive answers of *Pacem in Terris* and, „everyone has to take rights, but obligations, too“, or „if justice is missing, what else are states other than big hold-up gangs?“

Let us look back to those times:

In October 1963 President Kennedy announced the withdrawal of about 1,000 military advisors from South Vietnam, ten years later more than 500,000 GIs fought a terrible, bloody war in Vietnam.

On August 28, 1963 Martin Luther King declared „I have a dream...“

In July 1973 the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe started in Helsinki.

We faced some more major wars: Africa, the Iraq Wars 1, 2, and 3, the Afghanistan Wars 1 and 2, the Balkan Wars, the Genocide of Rwanda, the Arab Spring – and fall, and its last outcome, Syria.

The use of private military companies or contractors (PMCs) in war theatres, the use of unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs) against single persons, terrorism and the global war on terror (GWOT), all these factors add to a new face of war.

Such armed conflicts and hostilities have left behind millions of dead and wounded, bringing untold sorrow to mankind. And the future does not look much brighter, I am afraid.

Furthermore, since NATO's intervention in Kosovo in 1999, there has also been a new interpretation of the *ius ad bellum*, giving precedence to humanitarian rights (in case of genocide or ethnic cleansing) over the principle of state sovereignty. Thus a humanitarian intervention defies the formerly observed principle of non-interference in domestic affairs, sparking debates over its conflicting legal and ethical dimensions.

In this respect the emergence of a 'Responsibility to protect' (R2P) deserves special mentioning.

Given all this food for thought, it is not just the 50th anniversary of Vaticanum II, but rather an intense discussion and reflections on the eternal questions:

Whence Come We? What Are We? Whither Go We?

Of course we have to understand *Pacem in Terris* as a child of its respective time. But up to now in my opinion it is still valid and apart from *Gaudium et Spes* probably the most important document for us soldiers.

Later on our ecclesiastical assistant Monsignore Freistetter will hold the introductory lecture.

I am happy that father Dolan, Professor Van Iersel and Andreas Preuss will take the responsibility moderating our working groups. I expect intense discussions and our goal at the end shall be a general, concise position paper we all can agree on.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, dear friends!

Let me now briefly tell you what else happened.

Already in last Autumn we met several times to discuss a possible theme and agenda for this year's conference. Of course; we asked our friends in Slovenia about their ideas and included THEM.

One of my goals was; and still is, to become a stronger organization. The idea is to bring back our lost sheep and to find new ones, if I may express it in this biblical way.

During the Enquete organized by the Austrian Military Bishop, I met some bishops from Latin America, and I recognized that it would become difficult to get into contact without understanding any word in Spanish! I decided to start learning the language, but to be honest, it is already a little bit late – but I'll do my best! (Better late than never!)

Meanwhile I stood in contact with CELAM, the organization of the Military Bishops of Latin America and they invited me to come, but unfortunately the only week in October, I do not find the possibility for travelling. Hopefully next year!

We assisted the international soldiers mess in Cologne and I had the opportunity to talk to the German Defence Minister Thomas de Maizière.

Last summer the question of our 50th anniversary arose. As you all know Spain is one of the founding countries and the founding act took place at Santiago de Compostela.

When in Rome early March this year, we met by Divine Providence two Spanish priests, one of them the Vicar General of the Spanish Armed Forces, Don Pablo Sanchez Panadero. And we later on found again Don Lorenzo, – thank God, and thanks to Don Lorenzo for coming!! ([a few words for Lorenzo auf Deutsch!](#))

In June, we were in Madrid to start our talks with the Military Bishop, Monsignore Juan del Río Martín, and the Arzobispado Castrense.

It was possible to meet the Minister of Defence of Spain, Don Pedro Morenés y Alvarez de Eulate, and he wrote me quite a friendly letter in July, with the announcement that he will attend the opening of our 2015 conference. – This is really good news!

Back to early 2013.

In January our Anglican friends invited me, and it was organized by Brian and Jean Parker to visit MMI (Military Ministries International) in Oxfordshire, holding a lecture about AMI.

We met believers, earnestly and deeply thinking about our Lord Jesus and of how to organize a Christian life. We felt very connected to them and left as friends. Thank you Brian and Jean for coming. We are happy to have you with us!

When in Rome in March at the Holy See, we discussed again the Statutes of AMI and the remaining open aspects. Now we have finalised them and in November we will travel to Rome for signing officially the Statutes of AMI as an Organization accepted by the Holy See.

One open question is still unsolved – the question of getting the status of an NGO. It still looks difficult. During this summer a new idea was born, namely to become an NGO under the umbrella of the Order of Malta. I had some talks to the Order of Malta in Austria, but at this point in time it looks as if this possibility won't work either.

When Pope Francesco became elected I wrote a letter to him on behalf of AMI, congratulated and asked him to support our organization and to always have a look at us soldiers. A while later I received a nice letter from the Holy See, informing me that our Holy Father is thinking of us and will include us in his prayers.

In April I visited Celje a second time and met, together with Nelleke and Markus, Milan for preparing the present conference.

AMI met again in Lourdes this May, and I was happy to meet so many friends and we were singing, praying, thinking and discussing together. Thank you all for being there with us.

Finally, in August I tried to visit Military Bishop Rabek of Slovakia at Marianka, a small but well-known place of pilgrimage at the western slopes of the lower Carpathians, but failed because he was on vacations.

What goals are we striving for in the future?

I am grateful that Slovakia declared its readiness to host our conference in 2014. Spain will host our conference in 2015. We plan to publish a book(let) concerning history, goals and content of our work. Colonel Jedlicka will take the lead for it as the Editor in Chief. Thank you Michael, I know what it means!

Having found the hosting countries for 2014 and 2015, we can already start planning the year 2016!

Coming to an end I do not want to forget the most important thing from my point of view:

This August we had our 40th jubilee of marriage. Ida is great. She's my friend, comrade and beloved wife. She has been travelling all my life together with me, she's organizing our life, she takes the responsibility

for our children, the household, and the finances. She's my shield and I love her. Thank you Ida for being with me!

With this final remark I want to finish my report.

I wish all of us an interesting, fruitful and fulfilling conference, many opportunities for discussions and to talk together, to find friends or the old ones.

May God help us to pose the right questions and to find the right answers.

Thank you again for coming. God bless us all!

Thank you for your attention!