

**AMI Conference
Slovenia, 2013**

**Lay commitment and apostolic work of lay people in the military
in the light of the Second Vatican Council**

Introduction

May I begin by thanking you for the opportunity to come to Slovenia and address this year's AMI Conference. It is a joy to be with you again. I feel very much that I amongst friends and I regret that I cannot be with you beyond tomorrow. I must be in London to speak at the launch of the Catholic Social Action Network Criminal Justice Bureau.

I do believe that that topic that I have been asked to address strikes at the very heart of the purpose and ethos of AMI and I hope to be able to address some of the issues relating to the Lay Apostolate in the life of the Church – and in the Military context in particular – under the following headings: Renewed Lay Apostolate in the lit of the Second Vatican Council; Military Personnel as witnesses to the Gospel; The Lay Apostolate to the Military Community; Looking to the Future - the influence of AMI.

Lay Apostolate in the light of the Second Vatican Council

The Second Vatican Council, the anniversary of which we celebrate in this ear of Faith, was a great gift to the Church. The Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* on the Church, speaks of the Pilgrim People of God.

“Though they differ essentially and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are none the less ordered to one another; each in its own proper way shares in the one priesthood of Christ.”¹

and in speaking specifically of the Layperson:

“The sacred nature and organised structure of the priestly community is brought into operation through the sacraments and the exercise of virtues. Incorporated into the Church by Baptism, the faithful are appointed by their baptismal character to Christian religious worship; reborn as sons of God, they must profess before men the faith they have received from God through the Church...They are true witnesses of Christ, more strictly obliged to spread the faith by word and deed.”²

This view of the Church recognises the dignity of every member of the Church and of the common goal that belongs to us all - the destiny that is ours as those called by Christ.

¹ VATICAN II, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium* on the Church, n. 10. (hereafter LG)

² LG, n. 11.

Baptism, therefore, renders us members of the Priestly People of Christ, called to be builders of the Kingdom of God.

This vision of Church is further expounded in the final document of the Council. The Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* on the Church in the Modern World, where the vision of the Church as the leaven in the world is placed before us:

“...the Church...travels the same journey as all mankind and shared the same earthly lot with the world: it is to be a leaven and, as it were, the soul of human society in its renewal by Christ and transformation into the family of God.”³

Furthermore, one of the fruits of the Council is the Decree *Apostolicam actuositatem* on the Apostolate of Lay People. The very fact that the Council Fathers dedicated a document to the Lay Faithful is hugely significant. It speaks of the dignity of the lay vocation and of the place of laity in the life of the Church in these terms:

“The Church can never be without the lay apostolate; it is something that derives from the layman’s very vocation as a Christian.”⁴

The document speaks of the imperative of the Lay Apostolate for every member of the Church:

“The individual apostolate is everywhere and always in place; in certain circumstances it is the only one appropriate, the only one possible. Every lay person, whatever his condition, is called to it, is obliged to it, even if he has not the opportunity or possibility of collaborating in associations.”⁵

This same decree was clear on the question of association for works of the apostolate:

“They will be apostles both in their families and in the parishes and dioceses, which already are themselves expressions of the community character of the apostolate; apostles too in the free associations they will have decided to for among themselves.”⁶

Blessed John XXIII had called not only for a Council, but for the revision of the Code of Canon Law. The process of revision, started before the Council, was delayed by the Code Commission. The members recognised that the Council was to make a massive difference to the life of the Church and any revision should await the fruits of the Council. Pope Paul VI, himself a canonist, called for *Lex ecclesial fundamentalis* - a 'Fundamental Law of the Church'. In the event, the work that went into this document found its place, not in a separate document, but in Book II of the Code of Canon Law. This book reflects the work of the Council. It is headed *De populo Dei* - The People of God and some of the canons are key to our subject and to provide a clear foundation for the work of AMI. No longer can the rights

³ VATICAN II, *Pastoral Constitution Gaudium et spes on the Church in the Modern World*, n. 40. (hereafter GS)

⁴ VATICAN II, *Decree Apostolicam actuositatem on the Apostolate of Lay People*, n. 1. (hereafter AA)

⁵ AA, n. 16.

⁶ AA, n. 18.

of the laity be thought to be summed up as 'pray up and pay up'. No the rights and obligations of the Laity provide scope for a proper and fruitful life within the the community of faith. This is not to say, of course, that the life of the laity was without significance before Vatican II - far from it – but, as can be seen in the Council documents, the *Magisterium* is eloquent on the subject of the place and dignity of the laity in the Church and of the specificity of the lay vocation, rooted in Baptism.

The Code, therefore, lays before us the teaching of the Vatican Council in legal form, firstly with respect to all the Faithful:

“All Christ’s faithful have the obligation and the right to strive so that the divine message of salvation may more and more reach all people of all times and all places.”⁷

and, speaking of associations:

“Christ’s faithful may freely establish and direct associations which serve charitable or pious purposes or which foster the Christian vocation in the world.”⁸

It should be noted here that there is both an obligation on all the faithful – but also a right. The right to proclaim the Gospel message, by both word and example, is inalienable. The Code then goes on to provide legislation in respect of the laity specifically:

“Since lay people, like all Christ’s faithful, are deputed to the apostolate by baptism and confirmation, they are bound by the general obligation and they have the right, whether as individuals or in associations, to strive so the divine message of salvation may be known and accepted by all people throughout the world. This obligation is all the more insistent in circumstances in which only through them are people able to hear the Gospel and to know Christ.”⁹

“They have also, according to the condition of each, the special obligation to permeate and perfect the temporal order of things with the spirit of the Gospel. In this way, particularly in conducting secular business and exercising secular functions, they are to give witness to Christ.”¹⁰

Thus, we find it made clear in the Code of Canon Law that the lay person has the right to associate for the purposes of the Apostolate. This right of association was the subject of a the Conference of the *Consociatio Internationalis Studio Iuris Canonici Promovendo* in Munich in 1987 and the proceedings of that Conference make very useful, if rather serious, reading.¹¹ The very fact that the *Consociatio* chose that theme for the Conference was itself, I would suggest, a fruit of the Council.

⁷ The Code of Canon Law, c. 211. (hereafter CIC)

⁸ CIC, c. 215.

⁹ CIC, c. 225§1.

¹⁰ CIC, c.225§2.

¹¹ AYMANS, W. Et al, Das Konsotiative Element in Der Kirche, St. Ottilien, Consociatio Internationalis Studio Iuris Canonici Promovendo, 1997.

Military Personnel as witnesses to the Gospel

When it comes to the Lay Apostolate in a Military context, we must be mindful that the example of Catholic and Christian living is simply something that is done to the Military. It is done by the Military. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council had much to say about this, notably in the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* on the Church in the Modern World:

“Those who are sworn to serve their country in the armed forces are servants of the security and freedom of nations. If they carry out their duty honourably, they truly contribute to the common good of the nations and the maintenance of peace.”¹²

Is this not an Apostolate? It will indeed be the case that, in the midst of operations, the thought of Military Service as an Apostolate will be far from people’s minds. However, that contribution to the common good and the maintenance of peace is, surely, a real expression of the Apostolate. In this case, it is carried out by Individuals. They have not come together, *prima facie*, for the work of the Church – but surely, the Christian is at work here.

It might be considered that pursuing warfare in a principled fashion is merely a question of following the rules of engagement, but the Council Fathers recognised that something more is possible here.

Neither can we forget the example offered by those serving in the Military to their comrades in arms. The care for one another that exists within the military may not always be offered out of explicitly Christian motives – but it can often bring people into contact with the love of God Himself.

Reference has already been made to those circumstances in which the Lay person is the rightful and, perhaps, only person able to bring the message of the Gospel to those around them. There will be many circumstances in a military context where this is true; where it is not the Lay Pastoral Worker, Priest, Deacon or Religious who is the instrument of Christ, but the comrade in arms who, through their example of fidelity and perseverance to the Gospel in the most challenging of circumstances is the Apostle, the Evangelist.

At Easter this year, I had the privilege of receiving into Full Communion with the Catholic Church the Regimental Sergeant Major of the Grenadier Guards. He had been in Afghanistan with the Regiment on what proved to be a very difficult tour. Both the Commanding Officer and his 2ic were very committed, practising Catholics. It is most certainly the case that his decision to seek admission into Full Communion was a consequence of the example given by two such committed Catholics, persevering in Faith in the midst of the most difficult of conditions.

¹² GS, n. 79.

The Lay Apostolate to the Military Community

Many of you here come from countries where the Lay Apostolate has developed in what one might describe as a formal way. I am thinking of the practice of parishes, and – for us here – the Military community employing the services of theologically trained lay pastoral workers. This is a wonderful development in the life of the Church and a real expression of the principles laid down at the Council. It is, perhaps, easier in those countries where the effects of concordats between States and the Holy See have facilitated firmer financial provision that is not possible elsewhere.¹³

Even in those countries – or those military communities – where such developed provision is not possible, the exercise of the lay apostolate is a major feature of the life of the Church and expression of the obligations and rights of the Lay Faithful to respond to their Baptismal Vocation.

It is this principle of Vocation that is key in this context. For some ten years I had the privilege of serving as Vocations Director for the Diocese of Southwark. During that time, a week rarely went by when I was not contacted by someone seeking to discern their vocation. Usually, they were considering Priesthood, but not always – and it was not infrequently the case that their entering upon a process of discernment enabled them to realise that God had other ideas. What is key here is openness to God's will – and this applies to every individual seeking to do the Father's will – a real, living, transparent openness to the will of God.

This is fundamental in our considerations of the lay Apostolate within a Military context. It is true to say that we shall only find contentment in life if we find what it is that God wants of us. As Blessed John Henry Newman put it:

“God has created me to do Him some definite service
He has committed some work to me which He has
not committed to another
I have my mission...”¹⁴

The Military Apostolate will only be right for the individual, the Association of the Faithful will only be effective, if all begins with an open and honest discernment and courageous response to God's will.

The Ministry of the Laity in the military context should never be seen merely as a response to an apparent lack of Priestly vocations, for instance. If this is so, then there is a very great danger that it will have been established without any cognisance of the vocation of the lay persons concerned. Those of you here who are blessed to be called to this ministry as lay people will know what I mean here. You will have been called to your ministry – and to the live of AMI – and without that call, heard and answered, you would find little fulfilment and the effectiveness of your ministry would be less. I speak of this more as a *monitum* to those who might seek to see laity as a substitute. The vocations to which the laity are called – the

¹³ cf. CIC, c. 231§2.

¹⁴ BLESSED JOHN HENRY NEWMAN, "Meditations on Christian Doctrine: Hope in God—Creator" in Meditations and Devotions, 7th March 1848.

ways in which they respond to their Baptismal calling – are wonderful and true blessing for the life of the Church and the wider society.

The Church recognises this very powerfully in the prescriptions of the Code of Canon Law:

“Lay people who are found to be suitable are capable of being admitted by the sacred Pastors to those ecclesiastical offices and functions which, in accordance with the provisions of law, they can discharge.”¹⁵

Furthermore, they have both the right and the duty to then acquire the skills necessary for the apostolate to which they are called¹⁶ – be that as Lay Pastoral Workers, paid by the Church (or the Military) on a full-time or part-time basis – or those many volunteers engaged in Sacramental preparation, liturgical ministries or pastoral provision in so many parts of the Church.

Looking to the future - the Influence of AMI

I make so bold, at this point, to place before you some very practical ways in which I believe, AMI can continue to support and further the Lay Apostolate within the Military communities that we serve.

Firstly, among personnel themselves there is a great need for formation. You are all engaged in this in so many ways, but is there not a place for AMI to assist Military Ordinariates and those concerned with ministry to the Military with the provision of effective Catechetical materials. There is so much expertise in this room and we might consider ways in which assistance could be given in this area – that the individual Catholic serviceman or woman can be every better equipped to inform his or her life through the Gospel and the teaching of the Church.

Secondly, perhaps there is a role for AMI with regard to the formation that is a duty and right for all those whom God calls to an Apostolate to the Military community.

Thirdly, I would like take this opportunity to propose an engagement with the Pontifical Council for Culture. At the last visit *Ad limina Apostolorum* for the Bishops of England & Wales, the staff of that Pontifical Council were speaking with a group of us about the mandate they have to examine and foster the ways in which the Gospel is brought into different Cultures. The Military community has a particular culture – something which I was bold enough to raise with them – and it was acknowledged that this needed further consideration. As an Association of the Faithful, such an engagement may well be worth considering as part of the response to the call that has been given to us.

¹⁵ CIC, n. 228§1.

¹⁶ CIC, n. 229.

Concluding remarks

May I thank you again for inviting me to address this year's conference. The vocation of the Lay Person, that response to the Baptismal Calling, is a wonderful blessing, a real gift for the Church and the Military communities you are called to serve. May you be blessed in all that you do.

May I conclude with the Prayer of Blessed John Henry Newman:

God knows me and calls me by my name....
God has created me to do Him some definite service;
He has committed some work to me
which He has not committed to another.
I have my mission—I never may know it in this life,
but I shall be told it in the next.
Somehow I am necessary for His purposes...
I have a part in this great work;
I am a link in a chain,
a bond of connection between persons.
He has not created me for naught.
I shall do good, I shall do His work;
I shall be an angel of peace,
a preacher of truth in my own place, while not intending it,
if I do but keep His commandments and serve Him in my calling.
Therefore I will trust Him.
Whatever, wherever I am,
I can never be thrown away.
If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him;
In perplexity, my perplexity may serve Him;
If I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve Him.
My sickness, or perplexity, or sorrow may be
necessary causes of some great end,
which is quite beyond us.
He does nothing in vain; He may prolong my life,
He may shorten it;
He knows what He is about.
He may take away my friends,
He may throw me among strangers,
He may make me feel desolate,
make my spirits sink, hide the future from me—
still He knows what He is about....
Let me be Thy blind instrument. I ask not to see—
I ask not to know—I ask simply to be used.¹⁷

¹⁷ BLESSED JOHN HENRY NEWMAN, *op.cit.*