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Hundred years after the Great War and the moral and ethical Challenges for the Future

Introduction to the Conference Theme.

As I already mentioned yesterday, in preparing this year's conference we soon decided to pose the question of what we have learned from these past hundred years and how the guidelines of conducting war or hostilities have developed. What are our experiences we have, what are the results, and do we have cornerstones of correct and noble behaviour in a Christian sense?

I think it is important to discuss the themes

“Hundred years after the Great War and the moral and ethical challenges in the future”
and

“Evangelii Gaudium as an Inspiration for the Military” together.

Both are complementary and obviously important.

We do not want to hold lectures about history, I think that all of us have an excellent knowledge about the historical facts, but we want to discuss which developments have driven people to fulfil their soldier's duties correctly - or not. And we wanted to discuss the consequences of their actions. Finally, we strive to provide an answer to the challenges of changing attitudes by bringing Christianity into the Armed Forces.

To start our talks and discussions I want to say some words about the early 20th century, or better to say, about 1914:

The year of 1914 is a year of remembrance but also a memento, an incentive to reflect on this last century, the background of the historical events leading to war and the reason for the things to develop as they did, and also its results and its cruelties. Mostly the political and historical points of view are discussed and many institutions concentrate on the years of the war and neglect the years before and after and especially the effects on ethics and moral from a Christian point of view.

More the less, the questions that are dealt with are

- Who is to be blamed for the fact that WW I broke out? Today this is seen to be far more complex than 96 years ago.
- Maybe it is more the question of who lost their nerves earlier than the others?

- Sure, the assassination of the successor of the Austrian-Hungarian Throne, Francis Ferdinand was the spark, which ignited the fire. Today many believe that without substantial support by the German Empire, Austria would not have declared war on Serbia.
- It was the time of Imperialism and all European powers thought they had lost their best opportunities to become bigger and stronger (than the others). – All European states thought that way for different reasons: Germany, France, Austria, Great Britain, Russia, and Serbia - just to name the most important players.
- I think in the end it was a sequence of errors, ignorance, intrigues, or internal necessities that led people on the way to war.

Maybe one citation can help understand:

“Every successful imperialistic restraining policy in front of abroad will strengthen prestige, and power of the different classes, parties, castes having gained the success” (Max Weber).

Within a few days of the war unjustified cruelties against soldiers, civilians, prisoners of war, Cultural property, and so on, started. Of course the major operations of the war happened in Europe, but war also took place in Asia and Africa, and, e.g. via the British Crown even Australia and Canada went to war. And, just to be mentioned because with father Peter O’Keefe a representative of Australia is with us, Australia suffered the heaviest losses and casualties of a single nation until the end of war.

The end is well known and it is not necessary therefore to talk about it. Let me just say the following: the war left millions of dead, heavily injured (physically and mentally) and especially middle Europe deserted.

Its results lead directly into WW II and afterwards in the so-called Cold War or the period of “Peace by Fear”.

During this period surrogate wars took place, or ones, the Super Powers were not interested in.

When the iron curtain fell and the Soviet Union imploded and the Eastern European States became independent the “End of History” started – or on the contrary! In fact, since the end of WW II several hundreds of conflicts or wars took place or are ongoing.

Many terrible wars and conflicts in and outside Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America followed. 2001 and 2003 were the next steps and today the war against IS has begun, as it has been expressed by the US President.

Yes, even in my opinion 3rd World War has already started, but just a few people, thinking about the future of our planet, do recognize it.

Of course, in the aftermath of the last terrible war Humanitarian Law was advanced too, unfortunately more in theory than in practice!

Rules of war became stricter granting more rights to soldiers, victims in general and civilians including behaviour regarding the population centres, and its bases for survival such as economy.

War cruelties always happened, killing without necessity, massacres, torture, mistreatment of civilians or prisoners, taking the dignity of human beings, destruction or devastation of foreign property, historical or cultural property, without necessity or only to act out the fury of war.

The real questions from our Christian perspective, beside the question, why war at all, are as follows:

- What did we learn personally and as Armed Forces from wars during the last 100 years?
- How is it possible to behave as an honest and noble soldier or professional

in contemporary times and in the future?

- Which types of conflict will we face and how shall we act within them?
- What shall be our answer to being confronted with warriors and bandits, acting without any respect for life and dignity of the enemy and committing unthinkable cruelties?
- What answer do we have to the threat against territorial integrity, independence, freedom of choice concerning the way of life of a society?

I am convinced not to have apostrophized all important aspects of that problem, but I am convinced that our Christian Faith is the best method to strengthen military personnel in its attitudes, making them clear-sighted concerning the real necessities of wartime and correct behaviour within it. And I hope that we will find the answers to all of these questions at the end of our conference.

When introducing the theme I stated that from my point of view “*Evangelii gaudium*” is to be seen complementary to the main theme of the conference. Sure, it does not answer directly all questions we could pose as a soldier; it certainly concerns all of us as Christians and as human beings.

Therefore I use it for several reasons:

I see it as a guideline concerning the way of life in general.

As in several other documents the Holy Father focuses first on the grade of the loss of Christianity, especially in developed societies and the problem of fragmentation of these societies and the necessity to attempt to bring back our Lord and Christianity into societies living only in the traditions of Christianity but not in God.

Of course, concerning this challenging task, questions of happiness, justice and its social dimension and many others arise.

But it shows that real Christianity can be a way to overcome these extreme contrasts between developed and less developed countries and/or societies, especially the economic disproportions, which are forming the bases for hate and conflicts. And – all is starting within the smallest element of our societies: the individual and the family

Looking at Chapter Four, Part III of its Apostolic Exhortation the Holy Father postulates, beneath others, as follows:

- Time is greater than space,
- Unity prevails over conflict
- Realities are more important than ideas
- The whole is greater than the part,

as fundamental realities and an instruction for a faithful life.

In view of the essential message of *Evangelii Gaudium* I do not want to miss to touch upon the problem of Christians serving in the military. I think that serving our respective countries as soldiers or e.g. police officers is not seen as a special task or as an honour anymore. This causes insecurity for the serving soldiers themselves. Although all of us know that it is honourable serving our countries it is not seen that way by a bigger part of our fellow citizens (or it is not seen thus by the mass media). Especially in Western countries it is seen as a job, nothing more. And if someone is dying in action, it is his sole problem. It was not necessary to decide for this job, and everyone knows that it could be dangerous.

Another aspect moving us soldiers is the question of the dignity of life itself. More and more attempts open up possibilities to shorten life at the end because some people regard others just under the aspect of “costs”. It is so to say a cost orientated society.

From my point of view all contributions, speeding up the discussion concerning “self-determination” in this context are hypocritical and insidious. It is not only poor old people, but maybe heavily injured and handicapped soldiers, too.
We will have to deal with it and raise our voices.

That were just two single, but important aspects or examples, which are connected to Gaudium Evangelii, and how we could be touched by it.

Yes, Evangelii Gaudium will not solve any problem instantly, neither in societies, nor within the military. But it can serve as a beginning, as a starting point of thinking about the sense of life and rebuilding communities, in our case military communities, real comradeship, trust, Leadership based on Christian values.
It will be these values allowing us to resist evil, to stand firm and to fulfil our duties in a right and Christian way.
Hopefully we can transmit the content of this exhortation for use by us soldiers.

Let me come to an end with a shortened prayer at the end of Evangelii Gaudium:

Mary, Virgin and Mother,
You who, moved by the Holy Spirit,
Welcomed the word of life
In the depths of your humble faith:
As you gave yourself completely to the eternal one
Help us to say our own “Yes”,
To the urgent call, as pressing as ever,
To proclaim the good news of Jesus.

.....
Obtain for us now a new ardour born of the resurrection,
that we may bring to all the Gospel of life,
Which triumphs over death.
Give us a holy courage to seek new paths,
that the gift of unfading beauty
may reach every man and woman.

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.....
Mother of the living Gospel
Wellspring of Happiness for God’s little ones,
Pray for us!
Amen Halleluja.