

# **APOSTOLAT MILITAIRE INTERNATIONAL**

2015 General Assembly and Conference

Santiago de Compostela, La Coruña, Spain.

September 8, 2015

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## **NOTES BY A SPANISH CATHOLIC SOLDIER**

Please allow me to use a Spanish military expression to start my address:

*"Dear friends and colleagues",*

With this, I wish to point out two crucial elements that bind us together:

### **Fraternity and loyalty.**

Fraternity, because we all hail from the same Father, and Loyalty, because it makes hierarchy and obedience, - which are two essential virtues in the military - turn into a reality that everybody perceives as respect and mutual support.

But just like I asked for your permission to start my address as a soldier, I would also like to do so as a Christian, a member of the Roman Catholic Church, and as a citizen of what has always been known as the Western Catholic Kingdom. And as such, I can't but start my speech by appreciating God's presence with:

*"In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen".*

The Association of the Apostolat Militaire International asked the Spanish Minister of Defense a few months ago to take part in the General Assembly and in the celebration of the 50th anniversary. The Minister would have liked to join you and be able to welcome all of you, but even though this was considered a possibility for some time, his day-to-day reality and the political and parliamentary tempo have prevented him from fulfilling his wish. Hence, the Minister asked me to do so on his behalf, and I felt honoured. Therefore, I am trying to be not only a Christian soldier that talks about his personal convictions, but also as an Ambassador of the Minister's wish so that this conference can be fruitful. With this, I not only fulfil the formality of his assignment, but I also personally commit myself to the content.

As a Navy officer, I have often asked Our Lady of Mount Carmel for her protection. This year is the 500 anniversary of Saint Teresa of Avila, a Discalced Carmelite nun and Doctor of the Church, and I could not but listen to one of her advice, the one I read every time I visit Saint Calistus' Carmel, in Sierra Morena, in Andalusia.

*"Brother, choose between these two: Either enter not, or speak of God, as this is the science that is professed in Teresa's house"*

Therefore, and since I cannot keep quiet in this situation, I will talk about God.

My forty-five years' experience serving the Spanish Navy has allowed me to witness very significant changes in the world situation and, in Europe, in particular, but also to observe many paradoxes in those changes. Let me mention a few.

When the Iron Curtain came down and the Berlin Wall was eventually opened, a Secretary General of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO, said:

*“The fall of the Berlin Wall has left us with less threat but with less peace”.*

In the aftermath, we have seen conflicts multiply and, in particular, the violence in them.

Thus, the second paradox I wish to mention is the clash between what I have defined as the *“peaceful warrior”* and the *“bellicose pacifist”*.

In the past, armed conflicts were between nation-state, where the actors were soldiers within their Armed Forces and their codes of conduct were formally within the limits of common sense.

However, the evolution of war, which is essentially the clash between wills, and characterized by the use of force, suffering and bloodshed, has introduced new actors who abide no rules at all and who make an indiscriminate and unlimited use of violence against others regardless of whether they are military personnel or civilians. And the irony of the case is that they justify their behaviour by seeking their unjust peace and by identifying soldiers with violence.

However, it is a factual truth that wherever there are no Armed Forces there is chaos taking control of the situation and leading to an indiscriminate and brutal violence.

Finally, I would like to relate these paradoxes with the subject we are now dealing with: The situation of the Christian values, of God's Presence in our environment.

As I have mentioned before, in these forty-five years of active service in the Navy, I have witnessed the paradox of witnessing in the Spanish society:

- The birth and growth of a Europe based on Christian principles and which has led to the longest period of peace in our common history, and
- The progressive neglect or questioning of the need to make God present in the lives of the men and women in uniform, precisely because they perceive conflicts as a distant concern.

Still, this paradox, present in our societies, has gradually disappeared within the military field, through two realities:

- By participating in armed conflicts beyond our borders, where societies follow other patterns of behaviour.
- By perceiving an imminent risk to their lives, which every soldier feels in this new type of war, which we refer to as “asymmetric” or “hybrid”

As a result, someone who is aware he can die while fulfilling his obligations turns his gaze towards the transcendent.

In any case, no matter how complicated this may seem, this military profession is ruled by two very simple principles:

- First: Follow orders.
- Second: Look after people.

The action of ordering and obeying lies between these two principles. We may find the continuous balance of the Armed Forces between these two sentences. We continuously need to respond to the following question:

*To what extent do I have to jeopardize my people to follow orders?*

I noticed that a synthesis of the military was echoed in the words of His Holiness, Benedict XVI's encyclical "Caritas in veritate".

“To take a stand for the common good is on the one hand to be solicitous for, and on the other hand to avail oneself of, that complex of institutions that give structure to the life of society, juridically, civilly, politically and culturally”.

“Taking a stand for and availing oneself of the institutions” seem so similar to “looking after and following orders” that, as a result, I discovered that the military behaviour was reflected in today’s Christian doctrine.

But then again, the simplicity of these principles on which military life is based, sometimes contrasts with the difficulty of carrying them out, since nothing is as

difficult as explaining what is obvious and nothing is as uncommon as common sense. And both principles, "to follow orders and to look after", are obvious and are common sense.

Fulfilling ones duties is an essential part of the military. Whenever I have wondered about the limits of obedience, I have remembered the Calvary's Centurion to whom Our Lord never blamed for painfully doing their duty.

Moreover, and as Lieutenant General Cuartero once stated in 1955 in one of his weekly speeches in the Spanish National Radio, the Centurion that commanded Jesus' escort to the Calvary, was probably driven by mercy:

- To prevent the crowd from being ruthless against Jesus and his followers,
- To foster the encounter with those women that were accompanying His Mother,
- To allow Veronique dry His face, as the tradition says, and
- To request Cyrene's help,

In order to end up recognizing that *"This Man was God's Son"*.

Therefore, the portion of personal freedom that a soldier gives up in favour of society when he joins the Armed Forces, in no way limits his judgement between good and evil, and, above all, it clearly places reason against faith. Reason imposes obedience as an essential virtue of his behaviour, and faith makes that behaviour fall within other essential virtues such as charity, mercy and respect for life.

But the reason why we are gathered here today has to do with providing soldiers with well being in all walks of life. And, just like health care is in charge of physical care, religious assistance gives the necessary support for the spirit. While the former is necessary for soldiers to recover from their wounds, the latter is absolutely essential to endure hardships and overcome the difficulties of this profession before, during and after serving in the Armed Forces.

In this regard, I am convinced that there are two ways of approaching religious assistance that should be taken into consideration. The first one is of personal nature: the one that provides immediate assistance to soldiers; the other one has to do with the institutional structure: the one that acknowledges the need for God's presence in the military domain.

I guess the first Spanish military chaplains that joined the troops of Fernando III the Saint, in the storming of Seville, did so after being called by those that had

to fight. And their experience based on their need for God, fostered, centuries later - in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century - the continuous and significant presence of military chaplains as part of the military organization.

The image of the military chaplain appears in all sorts of campaigns, whether for the discovery or the conquest (of America). In any event, this presence responds to the origins of the society itself to which we belong. A society with Christian roots that has evolved based on principles supported by the Church.

This is due to the fact that the European society was for centuries structured around the Church and it progressed with a social doctrine that was evidently ahead of its time. Furthermore, today Europe, as part of the West where we live, is born thanks to the will of three practicing Catholics: Schuman, Adenauer and Alcide de Gasperi who were able to translate the very essence of the Christian social doctrine into political elements so as to change and structure a society that had been strongly confronted on two occasions in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

But, unlike other national communities, born from other religious principles, that acknowledge the religious origin of their social structure and that ask God to bless their nation, the Western community, Europe gradually forgets its religious and Christian origin to such an extent that it no longer understands the reasons for its own culture or art and, most importantly, it forgets the form of coexistence in which one grows up.

This lack of understanding of the society with itself, in all its aspects, leads to having to give pointless explanations to its own existence and to having to look for the intellectual basis of its society in absolutely inconsistent elements such as: Nihilism or relativism; or having to fill in that existential emptiness with secularism.

Because the difference I observe today is that “secularism” is much more than just a social phenomenon. It is a new religion that substitutes those historical principles on which the European society is based for some unverified values regarded as social progress. The reality, however, is that they actually take the society back to the darkest days of the origins of mankind, where life was denied either in its conception or in its end.

And, in my opinion, the problem of this historical evolution in which the western society lives today is to know where to go. And, as a Spanish seaman’s saying goes:

*“Those who know not which port to go, get no favourable wind”*

And, I think that what distinguishes ones from the others is that while some of us have God as the essence of our existence, others have no port to go, because “nothingness” of nihilism and the continuous variation of relativism is nowhere to go. It is simply to wander in the emptiness or to meander through the current.

Changes in the society substantially modify relations within the society itself, but most importantly, they build a new relation of powers. In the "Deus Caritas Est" encyclical, His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI analyses the changes in the industrial society and mentions how he observed a new way of relating capital and work.

This new relationship gave rise to a new form of power, and as a result, a new way of facing what is fair and what isn't. In this process of change, the Church always had some members that were far ahead of their time. However, the social teachings of the Church came a few years later with the consolidation of Marxism, which described itself as “the panacea to solve all social problems” and “the revolution and collectivisation of production resources” as the master recipes for this panacea. In my view: "The sons of darkness came before the sons of Light".

Nowadays, the evolution of society lies in technologies and mass media, that is to say, in science and image. That is why when I reread the "Caritas in veritate" encyclical I had the feeling that the Church was again at the forefront of social thinking.

To state that “*to take a stand for the common good is on the one hand to be solicitous for, and on the other hand to avail oneself of, that complex of institutions that give structure to the life of society, juridically, civilly, politically and culturally*”, has only but helped me remain even more convinced that as a soldier and a servant of society in the search for common good, as I said before, I had to do as I was instructed (using resources) and look after people.

However, in doing so, one cannot neglect that mass media are among those institutions that give structure to the life of society. They are much more than just communicators of information. Today, they are opinion makers when they tell the truth and, let's be frank here; they are reality manipulators when they seek a partisan benefit. If recognizing the truth is a common good, reality manipulation is the evil that fuels moral emptiness.

This clash between the truth and reality manipulation genders strong biases in the military on the *raison d'être* of the Armed Forces and its members. This is

why I would like to mention here today two conclusions that were included at the end of the document of the 2012 Assembly of the Apostolat Militaire International: *“The Christian Soldier in the Service of Just Peace”* to break preconceived notions and free our thoughts.

- “Conflicts may be suppressed with a strong military presence”.
- “Those in military service can clear the avenue that leads to peace in order that others may walk it in safety”.

Therefore, I can only but share with great pleasure Your Holiness’ conclusions when he says, “God gives us the strength to fight and suffer for love of the common good”. I am personally convinced that not believing in a higher power leads you to wrongly think that you can reach the summit of all that exists and that you can do anything you want without being accountable to anyone. I believe that the result of such a false thought is the origin of the improper use of military force.

And at this point and based on my own experience, I can only but analyse the conditions for the use of force in legitimate defence that is imposed by the Catechism of the Church.

These conditions could be summed up in four:

- When a nation or community of nations are victims of aggression.
- When there are no other means of defence.
- When there are serious prospects of success.
- When the use of weapons does not entail worse evils.

These are the traditional elements listed in the so-called “just war” doctrine.

The assessment of these conditions has a prominently political nature that is why in a democracy, soldiers will be able to display their military capabilities so that politicians can determine the appropriateness of its use both in manner and intensity.

But the appreciation of these conditions of moral legitimacy also requires the wise consideration of those in charge of common good. And soldiers do not lack this responsibility.

In this political-military dialogue, the men and women in uniform again have the responsibility to balance the necessary resources to achieve victory with the

fact of risking the lives of the soldiers under their command and, now also, of the society around them.

Thus, personal responsibility and the society's influence have a lot to do today with the conduct of the Christian soldier. Consequently, I will again shield behind the Catechism of the Church to think that:

*“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 nation and the maintenance of peace”*

Spanish soldiers, as yet other members of the society they belong to and serve, are influenced by nihilist, relativist and secularist positions. If against this background, we add that the Spanish Armed Forces had not been involved in any military conflict for fifty years, the result is the loss of a transcendental sense of life and death, and the outcome is a failure to perceive the need to have the services of a chaplain who could meet the intangible needs of the human spirit.

In this context, from the 1970s to the present, the situation has resulted in the following:

First of all, for the soldiers to consider that the presence of a chaplain in the national territory was unnecessary.

Secondly, for the soldiers to be aware of the need to have a chaplain, when they are out of their national territory.

Finally, for the Administration to tend to distort the nature of the soldier and simply reduce him to a tool for the use of force, without any spiritual component.

As a result, the conclusion I have reached is that:

- In view of the social reality that prevents God's Presence in public life, and
- Due to the limitations imposed by a freely chosen military life,

Future Christian soldiers will have to manifest:

- Their faith by example in every public event.
- Their charity in all their actions and expressions.

- Their support to the Church while living a life devoted to the Armed Forces.

And just like before when I began my address with a Spanish expression, I will now finish with another one that has for many years appeared in many official military documents in Spain.

*“May God keep you for many years”*