

Future outlook of AMI as a worldwide umbrella organization of Catholic Soldiers and expectations of AMI

“Even though recent wars have wrought physical and moral havoc on our world, the devastation of battle still goes on day by day in some part of the world. Now that every kind of weapon produced by modern science is used in war, the fierce character of warfare threatens to lead the combatants to a savagery far surpassing that of the past. The complexity of the modern world and the intricacy of international relations allow guerrilla warfare to be drawn out by new methods of deceit and subversion. In many causes the use of terrorism is regarded as a new way of waging war.” (Gaudium et Spes 79 - The Avoidance of War). Does it not sound actual and modern? Written 50 years ago?

Naturally, a fiftieth anniversary induces to look back into, and review, the past.

But I am much rather going to outline the present and the future perspectives of the Apostolat Militaire International from my viewpoint as its president.

The starting point of my deliberations is the fundamental idea of AMI as being an internationally active lay organisation of soldiers, which on the basis of self-imposed statutes deals with general and particular military issues and, thus, the issues directly related to faith and peace, ecumenism, and the search for additional ‘allies’ of AMI, sticking with military jargon.

No doubt the Apostolat Militaire International is an unusual, and with regard to the effects of military use of force, even significant lay organisation.

In what kind of world do we live?

It is difficult to exactly identify the point in time at which the world, from a present perspective, came out of joint or, rather, at which the geopolitical situation changed fundamentally. One event always causes the next one to happen. The collapse of the Iron Curtain in Europe undoubtedly brought about a fundamental change of the global security political and geostrategic situation. Many conflicts that had shifted to the background due to the East-West conflict suddenly became the focus of world politics.

At the same time, the age of a bipolar world ended, giving rise to a multipolar one, with all its positive and negative consequences. Conflicts of all types erupted, as if Pandora's box had been opened. I am referring here to interstate military conflicts as well as civil wars and armed conflicts, which know neither rules nor mercy. All too often religious causes were used as a pretext in order to divert from the true ones, including, among others, poverty, lack of education, training, and perspectives. To underline this, let me just mention the situation in the Middle East, especially in and around Syria:

More than 4 million refugees are living in the region;

10,8 millions of people are depending on help from others (of these are 6,8 millions internal displaced persons –IDP).

In Iraq 1,8 millions of IDP and 250.000 Syrian refugees are living.

In Jordan 1,5 million of refugees from Syria are living,

In Turkey 1,8 millions and in Egypt 130.000 refugees from Syria are living.

Not to talk about Afghan refugees at all!

Yes we have a sense of outrage at all cruelties happening in the whole region, not knowing exactly how to end it.

But we must not forget concerning this the developments in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1995 in the midst of Europe.

Also the Christian world itself is changing. Europe is increasingly facing away from Christianity, although simultaneously the inhabitants of this continent urgently search for answers to the old and ever topical questions: "Who am I? Where am I coming from? Where am I going? - For us as Christians the answer is given with strong faith and trust: We are going home to Our Father.

Our acting is based on our belief in Jesus Christ.

I am conscious that even in European Armed Forces Christian soldiers, laypersons and organisations are not everywhere viewed with great enthusiasm. Acknowledging God already seems to have become a problem in Europe, and attempts at pushing the faith into the offside and the private sphere are obvious. The danger of a spiritual vacuum developing is high, with an even greater risk of this vacuum being filled by something else!

Yesterday I talked to a young French man, working supporting French pilgrims in Spain and he told me that the situation of Christianity, especially Catholicism, in France becomes more and more difficult. It is not the problem of separation between state and religion, but the fast augmenting aggressive atheism in France, getting more and more influence attempting throwing away religion/Christianity and to introduce, instead of, Atheism as a new “anti-religion”.

Meanwhile, on other continents the number of Christians keeps growing. At the same time, more Christians than in a long time suffer from persecution and expulsion (and even more Muslims, who are hard-pressed by their so-called fellow brethren).

This is the world in which the Apostolat Militaire International is active today.

Of course, in addition to the Holy Scripture, numerous documents, in particular the documents of the Second Vatican Council and the subsequent ones, provide a great basis for debating the problems linked to soldier-ship from a Christian point of view and to resolve these problems!

Especially documents, such as ‘Gaudium et Spes’ and ‘Pacem in Terris’, are not taken into consideration sufficiently, since they describe the developments in the world that we see today and have to expect in the future.

Even if we have a look at “Laudato SÍ” we can learn about the future and the challenges and threats for all of us. Our Holy Father holds the mirror at us to allow to catch one’s reflection to see what we are doing to our world and what we have to expect, if we do not radically change our way of consuming our planet.... as soldiers we are able to identify expectable and upcoming armed conflicts with all its consequences.

“Worth living for...” and “truly living in the sense of the bible and proclaiming the Gospel” are the guiding principles of our Apostolat Militaire International. We soldiers understand ourselves as the bearers and conveyors of our faith. Therefore, and as a first answer, I am convinced that in all countries in which Christians serve in armed forces, lay organisations should be set up to support priests effectively in their work or to meet and recognize others as friends and believers, but especially for soldiers and military leaders to live Christian values and, in so doing, make them more authentic.

Military action as a challenge

The military operates within a more or less strict framework of international legal documents (law of armed conflict, international humanitarian law etc.) and national regulations ensuring that soldiers act correctly in operations and maintain the enemy's dignity. This applies both to hi-tech operations and archaic hand-to-hand combat.

Yet, we humans are prone to making mistakes and have a tendency toward misconduct. In many a societies, the ability to differentiate between things that should, may or must not be done under any circumstance has come to be a set of courses of action used rather arbitrarily. This holds true for the military as a part of society as well.

The military acts within a space of interdependence and with the plannable tendency to goal achievement, achievement of the rationally feasible but also of the ultimate.

Hierarchical systems such as the military realise that soldiers are prone to making mistakes, thus striving to avoid mistakes and misconduct by way of the principle of order and obedience and a sophisticated system of controls. This fact by itself demonstrates the theory that humans are simply prone to misconduct. Not taking advantage of the awarded privileged position as a superior, but also as a subordinated soldier, is a great challenge. Already the Ten Commandments of the Old Testament answer this issue.

At the same time trust forms the base of military action. This principle applies to all soldiers, from the highest down to the lowest rank. Consequently, for all soldiers of all levels solid formation, the ability to think independently, exemplary conduct and achievements as a superior are considered the basis of being a soldier. A wink in one's eye is permissible only with positive issues, turning a blind eye is not. Superiors must earn trust. They must not abuse it! This principle applies equally to political leaders and those holding political responsibility.

At the same time I am convinced that honourable and ethical behaviour, which is based merely on service regulations and provisions of the international humanitarian law, will not be sufficient for the desired and required task accomplishment. The basis for correct military behaviour are solid formation as well as Christian thinking and understanding so soldiers are able to endure the inconceivable tensions and

atrociousness with which they are or may be confronted in operations as well as in normal duty. It is hard to understand the incredible inhumane horrors of which humans are capable of as a result of blind hatred but also cool, unscrupulous calculation. We are confronted with such matters via the media practically on a daily basis. Let us accept that, despite everything, we do not learn of many other inconceivable atrocities (and everything is even worse than it seems)!

A firm internal and external attitude and conviction is required in view of all these crimes, perpetrated in the name of whomever, to endure them and, yet, still act correctly. This demand and notion can be a contradiction to military principles, such as, for example, the one of the functioning” soldier conflicting with that of the thinking soldier.

The problem is obvious that in many, extremely differently developed countries or armies the soldier as a human moves to the background. More than ever before, today’s technological possibilities make it possible not to only incapacitate the enemy, but to annihilate him. This is a modern variation of “making no prisoners”. At the same time, the ongoing conflicts show that the quasi-archaic hand-to-hand combat, despite all the technology, continues to form part of the decisive toolkit of military acting.

AMI, therefore, intends to encourage soldiers to be Christians and to strengthen their understanding of soldier-ship. Our bond with Jesus Christ opens up another possibility for us to discuss the pros and cons of the military service and to elaborate on the responsibility it holds.

Apostolat Militaire International as an answer

“Again and again the edict on the lay apostolate underlines its significance and relevance in and to this world.”

The military should, therefore, not conceive religion as a private matter, but, quite the opposite, take care of the religious education of soldiers in a proactive manner, since it is key – and a particular important one at that – for performing one’s duties in the military service properly. The Christian faith is not fanaticism, but the basis for humane and sympathetic acting.

A further key issue for that is the possibility that Christians, wearing the uniform, discuss the problematic aspects of their profession and the moral-ethical fundamentals for their self-conception and for exercising their profession. This is the only way to succeed in building armed forces that can take up their daily service and participate in military conflicts with the firm conviction that their actions are truly righteous.

AMI, as a union of soldiers from many and very diverse countries, has taken on the task to consider all issues of military life, duties and actions from a Christian perspective and to enter and permeate them.

In so doing, AMI makes a significant contribution enabling our armies to fulfil their tasks on the basis of responsibility, trust and their Christian conviction that “Those who devote themselves to the military service of their country should regard themselves as the agents of security and freedom of peoples. And - as long as they fulfil this task properly, they are making a genuine contribution to the establishment of peace.” (Gaudium et Spes, 79)

Of course, there are always ups and downs in a movement, and I can notice that as well, having worked at AMI for over ten years now. Especially within the last ten years, actually already under the leadership of my predecessor, Brigadier General Reinhard Kloss from Germany, we succeeded in transforming AMI into a real ‘working’ group, with the objective to address and discuss problems and offer solutions.

We can clearly see the challenges the military is facing today by just taking a look at the topics of the conferences of the past years.

At the same time the duration of the annual conference was cut down, so as to conform to the requirements of the respective armed forces and the respective superiors of our delegates. Yet, I admit that some topics would have called for one or more additional days of debate in order to be discussed sufficiently.

Therefore, I would suggest that in the future, depending on the conference topic in question, one more day should be added, if possible.

AMI has its finger on the pulse of the time and takes up difficult topics, also with regard to its behaviour towards an enemy that does not show any human feelings and whose actions are simply geared towards killing.

AMI deals with questions of live and death, because this is simply part of being a soldier. AMI, because of this self-conception, will try and give our societies answers concerning the areas of human life put to discussion.

From my point of view, the Apostolat Militaire International has to adopt two strategic approaches in the future:

One the one hand, there is the discussion of burning topics of the present and the future, the conflicts with which we are confronted; embedded in the teachings of the Holy Scripture and its translation into the present day, commencing after the II Vatican Council.

We want and should strengthen and improve the (human) quality of our soldiers. This means that in our world, which has become so irreligious, AMI is capable of giving a significant intellectual and spiritual input by dealing with topics that touch upon the very essence of the military and by elaborating the relationships with the Christian values in such a manner that our member states and the countries cooperating with us will be able to offer further answers from an inevitably more general view of the national requirements of their armed forces.

AMI, therefore, stands for instruction and the strengthening of the knowledge of and about our Christian faith as the basis for a deeper involvement and discussion with people who think differently.

AMI is, however, convinced that the passing on or ceding of responsibility to the military chaplain is an absolutely insufficient response and approach. The few, yes too few, military chaplains are faced with too many soldiers, who in the hour of threat seek contemplation and help. Only soldiers who are educated Christians will be on their side and in a position to handle and give answers to all these hardships and requirements by maintaining comradeship and military respect.

In the end, also reality has to be met, since it is laypersons wearing military uniform who are soldiers themselves, used to bearing responsibility, and who want to assume this Christian responsibility as comrades, regardless of whether they are superiors or not.

Therefore, interest in AMI and cooperation with us has to be sparked in as many countries and with Christians in armed forces as possible. The step outside Europe took place already at an early stage, and in the future AMI is to grow well beyond

Europe's borders. We will attempt to recruit more states and their armed forces as members and we will make every effort to reintroduce those into our midst to whom, in the past, we did not pay sufficient attention. We will put AMI on a worldwide basis. Yet, AMI must not lose its character as a lay organisation. It will be up to the member states and our associated partners to dispatch not (only) chaplains to our conferences, but especially ordinary soldiers, because only then will they be able to relate directly from their lives, i.e. the practical aspects, and to shed light on and explain the problem areas of the military service.

Steadfast Christians will remain good and humane soldiers, even in inhumane situations. Contributing to this is the task of the Apostolat Militaire International. In this sense I wish our society all the best and a peaceful future for the years to come. May the Lord, who loves us dearly, look after us in performing our duties, and may our belief, love and hope guide us on our way!

Thank you for your patience and attention!