

AMI General Assembly
Santiago de Compostela 6-11 September 2015

Notes on the first day's lectures by Brian Parker

Monday 7 Sep

0900 **Welcome Address** – Bgen Miquel Alonso Baquer

The President made a summarising response to the General's address, indicating that we have an obligation to love our neighbours in a proactive way (taking the initiative) as well as a reactive way (making a response). The AMI pilgrimage began in Santiago de Compostela 50 years ago and has matured during that time so that we may look today with expectation at the practical advancement of Nostra Aetate (in our times) as we develop our theme of interreligious dialogue.

0945 **Lecture A** – The Armed Forces of Spain
Commander, Joint Operations Command: Admiral Fernando Garcia Sanchez

Admiral Sanchez outlined the organisational, operational and religious support aspects of the Spanish Armed Forces. Covering both organic and operational structures he illustrated the chain of command from strategic at ministerial level through military strategy and operational command to tactical implementation.

His illuminating brief on current operations gave an overview of the disposition of Spanish Forces at home and on foreign deployment together with a pictorial summary of operations abroad since 1989.

In dealing with religious support, he explained the state understood both its necessity and the soldier's right to expect it. Spain has a long tradition of providing chaplains at home and abroad for those whose profession puts them in mortal danger on behalf of the state and maintains religious liberty as part of the Spanish Constitution. Chaplains may be expected to be embedded with significant deployed forces away from home. Active service raises the profile of the spiritual dimension of life and offers many apostolic opportunities for personal and corporate enrichment of faith.

Admiral Sanchez concluded with some examples of religious observance and practice on land and at sea.

A lively question time explored issues of denominations other than Roman Catholic, lay groups, the impact of the immigrant crisis, religious freedom and human rights, the geographical focus of Spanish military deployments and Kenyan difficulties with the porous Somalian border.

1115 **Lecture B** – We.Serve.Catholic
Lt Col Christoph Auer - Board Member of GKS

Lt Col Auer explained how the theme for this year's General Assembly had been inspired by the philosophy underlying the Bundeswehr reorganisation and the end of conscription in 2011: "Wir. Dienen. Deutschland." (We. Serve. Germany.) This encapsulated the principles of personal commitment, loyal service and country. In 2014 GKS adapted this approach with "Wir. Dienen. Katholisch." (We. Serve. Catholic.) adding a divine dimension and suggested the theme be adopted for the AMI GA of 2015. Translating from the national to the international arena and retaining the essential spiritual aspects, the expression encompasses our personal and collective calling to universal service both within and beyond the "Catholic" borders and boundaries.

The perspective of other countries had been sought:

Nigeria – The divine mandate to defend the innocent was exemplified in the fight against Boko Haram. Although New Testament teaching leans towards personal non-resistance and non-retaliation, this needs to be balanced with the maintenance of order and the exercise of justice in society.

Slovenia – Some foundations for Christian ethics and witness would be found in a thorough grounding in history, the teaching of the church, international law and humanitarian precepts. These would be ineffective without professional qualities and qualifications and commitment to a personal spiritual life.

Belgium – In tune with the environment of pilgrimage at Santiago de Compostela, much evidence of personal generosity and selfless service to others was evident at Lourdes.

Slovakia – We were reminded that, although we may be involved in human conflict, we strive for victory against evil itself. As St Paul said, "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. (*Eph 6:12*). Our calling is always to be peacemakers. (*Matt5:9*).

Austria – We have a binding mandate focused in Vatican II. Each lay member has a personal responsibility for spreading the Gospel, building up the faithful, observance of the liturgy, charitable works and sustaining the Christian community.

Lt Col Auer continued with an analysis of the individual elements of "We. Serve. Catholic."

We – The commitment of the individual to be part of the whole, the obligation of the whole to act in coordinated cooperation against injustice, disease and disaster. Some examples were given from recent events.

Serve – The object of our serving should be protection, relief and upholding the human rights of the persecuted. Our example is the service and sacrifice of Christ. We are aware that wrongdoing is a permanent feature of the human condition from personal to international. Our God given conscience must be our final authority when faced with the inevitable dilemmas that our military service brings. We should, via the UN, bring to international justice those who commit atrocities and counter this evil by building capacity within nations to protect the vulnerable.

Catholic – Universal, general, all embracing principles were cleverly built on geometric shapes – from triangle to square and from square to what was described as

“The Catholic Pentagon” with apostolate, charity, conscience, faith, and right to ? at its corners. Contained within the perimeter of the figure was the statement from Gaudium et Spes of the Second Vatican Council, “Those too who devote themselves to the military service of their country should regard themselves as the agents of security and freedom of peoples. As long as they fulfill this role properly, they are making a genuine contribution to the establishment of peace.”

Questions and discussion followed covering military intervention to protect persecuted Christians, the limitations of the UN, personal response to “a slap in the face”, and the nature of civil law regarding the dangers and obligations relating to personal intervention.

1145 Reports by the President and Secretary General

1530 **Lecture C:** 50 Years of Gaudium et Spes (Joy and Hope) and the declaration Nostra Aetate (In Our Times).

Professor Dr Marcel Poorthuis – Tilburg School of Catholic Theology

The documents that offer a Catholic foundation for interreligious dialogue – Gaudium et Spes and Nostra Aetate were products of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and addressed respectively the Catholic Church's teachings about humanity's relationship to society, and the relationship of the Catholic Church with Non-Christian Religions. Professor Poorthuis confided that neither was easy reading but their thrust, that there is one humanity and many religions, gave an essential impetus to resolving the spiritual and societal divisions of the world by dialogue. Man may have been created in the image of God but he must get wiser or face his end!! All religions reflect some element of divine truth, all have what they regard as their historic non-negotiable dogmas so, does dialogue have a future?

In Professor Poorthuis' observation there were two recent phenomena - fundamentalism and post-modernism - that present a significant threat. They appear philosophically poles apart but both undermine interreligious dialogue.

Fundamentalism – The Professor's view was that its origins are recent and from early 20th century American Protestants who held a simplistic view of the infallibility of the Holy Bible and its literal applicability in all aspects of life. Further, the adoption of highly selective academic, religious and scientific studies and the neglect of appropriate scholarly consideration of the meaning of sacred texts led to an individualistic, dogmatic belief that one's own convictions are aligned with divine authority. Similar adherence to the notion of unique divine authority may be seen in Islamic Fundamentalism where, paradoxically, Muslim believers who differ from fundamentalist dogma are seen as a more significant enemy than the “pagan” non-Muslim world. Both forms employ considerable skill in internet communication, public relations and propaganda. Each is adept at attacking the other!

Some examples of “Chick Cartoons” and a video clip were screened in which highly derogative views of Islam were illustrated from a “Christian fundamentalist” perspective. (No parallel Islamic fundamentalist propaganda was presented). Catholicism is also targeted with distorted attacks on doctrine and traditions. Thus, Islam and Roman Catholicism are seen as the classical enemies of divine truth and to engage in dialogue with either would be satanic and both would be eschatological enemies of the returning Messiah!

Professor Poorthuis offered us his summary of the characteristics of fundamentalism:

1. It is highly selective in its use of religious sources.
2. It displays an equally selective use of modern science.
3. An absolute dichotomy is held between the small group of ‘real’ believers and an overwhelming majority of ‘traitors’.
4. A self-perception of immunity from criticism.
5. Belief in conspiracy.
6. World politics is invariably viewed in apocalyptic terms of light versus darkness.
7. There is manifestly a deep disappointment toward modern society, quite often after having been exposed to it.
8. A complete passing over of the relevant religious establishment of religious leaders, theologians and traditional scholarship.

Post-Modern Religion – The piecemeal assembly of a multiplicity of convictions and beliefs into non-critical religious entities without confessional or denominational boundaries challenges both secular science and institutional religion. A personalised spirituality supplants both the demanding precision of the former and the mandatory beliefs and traditions of the latter. There are deceptive similarities between interreligious dialogue and post-modernism. Both are driven by plurality and the enrichment of communal quality, however, the underlying philosophies are very different. Interreligious dialogue seeks to enrich by the mutual acceptance of and respect for diversity, post-modernism disregards the historic and traditional to merge all into a foundationless structure in which the very existence of difference is doubted and its disappearance is deemed desirable.

The surface similarities give rise to dangers even in environments and events whose *raison d’être* is interreligious dialogue. The three levels of dialogue – grass roots, academic and institutional all bear a representative function in conference. An evolving bond with the consulting community could erode the commitment of the representative to his sending institution and the need for an objective appreciation of difference may be thus compromised. The anti-institutional emphasis of post-modernism fosters an abandonment of religious boundaries and demarcations whilst, like fundamentalism, it steals the clothes and achievements of Christian Orthodoxy and attempts to render true dialogue obsolete.

The benefits of an open minded approach to other religions, without preconceptions, preconditions or prejudice, should be self evident. However, in any such dialogue, one should guard against the inherent danger of putting one’s own convictions into abeyance.

What should be done? – Professor Poorthuis suggests we could accept the decline of interreligious dialogue. Political correctness tends to dilute genuine discussion and inhibits objectivity. He warns, however, against the veiled intolerance of post-modernism that, whilst commencing with universalism and respect, ends in non-engagement, non-accountability and non-acceptance of any criticism whatsoever. He further suggests that interreligious dialogue should seek practical cooperation rather than theoretical consensus. His quotation from *Nostra Aetate* summarises with succinct eloquence the answer to the fate of the world and humankind's most pressing dilemma and duty.

"We cannot truly call on God, the Father of all, if we refuse to treat in a brotherly way any man, created as he is in the image of God. Man's relation to God the Father and his relation to men his brothers are so linked together that Scripture says: "He who does not love does not know God" (1 John 4:8). No foundation therefore remains for any theory or practice that leads to discrimination between man and man or people and people, so far as their human dignity and the rights flowing from it are concerned." (Nostra Aetate §5)

Conclusion – The foregoing has been a summary of Professor Poorthuis' lecture. His concluding remark together with his conclusions proper are reproduced in full.

By way of conclusion, instead of proposing a whole change in mentality which runs counter to probably unavoidable postmodern trends in society, I simply propose some measures to safeguard the level of interreligious dialogue, leaving its implementation to whoever wishes to do so.

1. If we want to protect interreligious dialogue against political correctness, we should watch out for professional dialogue participants. Instead we should guarantee a change of dialogue partners every few years.
2. Avoiding delicate topics such as the Israeli-Palestinian problem, fundamentalism, religious violence and blasphemy, education of a new generation, ethical questions *vis-a-vis* technical advancement and secularism, anti-Islamism and antisemitism, is detrimental to the impact of interreligious dialogue upon society. It fosters the impression of a naive mutual understanding without taking serious actual tensions (this attitude is known in the Netherlands as: 'drinking cups of tea together').
3. The three levels of interreligious dialogue: grass root, academic and institutional (i.e., religious leaders), should be in constant interaction with each other. Academic encounters between religions end up to become sterile if they are not fed with issues and problems from the respective religious institutes. Religious institutions in their turn might refrain from dialogue altogether and so will remain stuck in ignorance and prejudice if not challenged by academic learning. Both levels, the religious institutions and academic learning, would remain unfruitful without influencing their respective religious communities.
4. We should regard religious truth claims not as a stumbling block to interreligious dialogue in which a consensus would be the goal, but rather as incentives to dialogue in which differences of opinion are respected.

5. Truth claims should be combined with a dialogical attitude. Truth claims as inner convictions should be welcomed, but buttressing these by disparaging the religious convictions of other should be avoided in order to maintain a dialogical attitude.

6. The aim of interreligious dialogue is practical: to contribute to world peace and to foster a global ethic.

7. The most fruitful antidote against fundamentalism is not post-modernism, but strong religious convictions, organically connected with tradition and community.

There was a good level of interaction during the Professor's talk and questions and discussion also followed concerning who our overtures for dialogue should be addressed to; the nature of post-modernism, our approach to Jews and Muslims and the nature of dialogue itself.