



Haarlem/Amsterdam, May 2016.

Your Eminences, your Excellency's, dear Members of AMI,

It is my pleasure to cordially welcome you to the Netherlands for the 51st conference of the *Apostolat Militaire International*. Our present world is full of armed conflicts, presenting our military forces with many challenges. The need for the lay apostolate of the Catholic military is therefore greater than ever.

First and foremost, the Church listens to the experiences of Catholic military all over the world. The Church tries to understand the signs of the times, one of which is armed conflict. Therefore the Church attempts to analyse armed conflicts. The Church is grateful that Catholic military are willing to share their experiences, views and practices with her.

But the lay apostolate of Catholic soldiers intends to do more than contribute to the interpretation of conflict. There is a second challenge here. It is also about building a community of the faithful beyond the boundaries of nations and military institutions.

For Justice, Peace and Reconciliation are processes, which are fundamentally international by nature. AMI offers an important framework for creating a community of international peace and understanding among Catholic soldiers of all nations, even of former enemy nations.

Thirdly, AMI has an important task in the areas of witnessing and education.

All Catholics believe that Jesus Christ is the Prince of Peace about Whom the prophet Isaiah sang (Is.:9:5).

To be a witness of the peace of Christ amidst armed conflicts is an important task for all Catholic soldiers. It includes expressing one's own faith, and engaging in the educational task of helping the armed forces worldwide to fulfil their tasks in a just, secure and compassionate way.

In His encyclical *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis offered substantial and important reflections on the causes, reasons, alibis and consequences of war. The Pope calls for a political practice of dialogue, based on Catholic Social Teaching. It is widely known that the Holy Father urgently pleads for a humane treatment of refugees, and urgently calls for elaboration of instruments for conflict prevention. The moral preference for nonviolent conflict resolution does not exclude the right of self-defence. But in these times, both these paths towards peace need thorough reflection and updating.

I am grateful that ACOM, the Dutch union for military personnel, and AMI-member, has taken it upon itself to organise this AMI conference, in close cooperation with the national Catholic home front organisation *Nationaal Katholiek Thuisfront*.

A major objective of ACOM is the well being of military personnel and their families. Although one might assume that in the eyes of a union, well being is thought of in terms of income, pensions and so on, it is my opinion that this particular organisation has shown a much broader understanding of 'well-being'.

In recent years ACOM has played a major part in the debate on ethical behaviour during missions of the Dutch military abroad, and has shown a sincere interest in embedding pastoral care in the military organisation.

The Netherlands has played an important part in the history of AMI, as one of its founding fathers. After the many recent Assemblies in other countries, it is a pleasure to see the AMI-family back in the Netherlands, after the Conferences in 1967, 1996 and 2008.

Although the Roman Catholic military and their families in the Netherlands primarily have been and still are members of their local parishes, it is well understood in Dutch society, that they are 'special'. It is with this feeling that AMI is proud to be the coordinating organisation for Roman Catholic soldiers. Not to be defensive in faith, but to cross the respective national cultural boundaries, united in our Christian faith.

I trust that ACOM, together with *Nationaal Katholiek Thuisfront* and the support of the Ministry of Defence including the Chaplaincy Services will provide a sound base for this 2016 AMI Assembly. I hope that you will find opportunity for prayer, meditation, discussion and exchange of information. Of course the ACOM/NKT organising team will provide an introduction to the history and culture of The Netherlands.

So once again I wish you a warm welcome back to the Dutch Ecclesiastical Province!

May the queen of Heavenly Peace, mother Mary, guide each of you in your search and exchange.

Pax tecum.

Jozef Marianus Punt,
Bishop of the Dutch Military Ordinariate