



Final Results of the General Assembly and Annual Conference of Apostolat Militaire International in Vught, The Netherlands, September 18-22, 2016

The General Assembly of the Apostolate Militaire International (AMI) examined the issue of refugees in our “common home” as described in *Laudato Si* by Pope Francis, from the perspective of faithful lay Catholics operating within the militaries of their various member countries. Though national leaders make the decisions about receiving refugees, it is the military who are most often involved not only in defending national borders where migrating families congregate, but also in caring for such refugees.

Also, at times refugees are housed in former military camps, which the present military are sent back in to run. Military are also often used in transporting refugees within their own nations—all while protecting them from any dangerous elements that infiltrate among them. *Laudato Si* calls us to show mercy, and the consensus that emerged from all the discussions was that hallmark of such mercy is deep respect in the care shown for each person—as made in the image and likeness of God.

Such a dignified and respectful approach is tested by various factors:

1. The massive numbers that have come and the overcrowding, that often accompanies such numbers;
2. Language difficulties, which sadly heighten frustration and diminish trust;

3. Cultural divides, which often result in refugees misusing and (most often unintentionally) damaging infrastructure, such as not knowing how to use cooking areas or sanitation devices.

The struggle to show mercy is hampered by limited national resources (and challenges in the scramble for such resources amid any climate changes), as well as fear of the migrating groups. Moreover, if there is no clear political solution for these migrating people, the military trying to show mercy can themselves begin to feel disillusioned—which affects their perspective and behavior. Compounding this anguished frustration, this “spinning of one’s moral compass,” is the desensitization to the horrors experienced by many, and the temptation to “accept as normal today actions that would have been unthinkable yesterday.”

Moreover, because refugees have gone through considerable trauma, military should receive special training in understanding and handling such individuals. Military, especially the newest military members can be caught between frustrated and angry migrants and an equally upset local population, all of which tempts them to think and react in terms of combat actions rather than mercy or compassion. Providing military at all rank levels with an item to give them the “excuse to behave better” (such as a religious emblem or a pocket card of the AMI Berlin Declaration—updated to reflect the treatment of refugees) along with explanations of such would assist them in resisting any such pressure to mistreat those in their care.

Several Dutch national leaders and a number of international scholars and bishops spoke to us, including our former Ecclesiastical Advisor, now the military bishop of Austria, Mgr Freistetter, who accented the Pope's focus on prevention of war—indeed his skepticism on being able to justify war when they did not try to prevent its causes—by keeping in mind the consequences of war, including refugees. Advice from our delegates, and insights from Africa in particular, elaborated such examples: such as infiltrators are in the camps. These often intimidate or even abuse the other camp residents, simply because military or other care-givers, no matter how compassionate they might be, cannot be everywhere at once. Suggestions of separating refugees into groupings by age and gender to identify and

remove infiltrating terrorists sadly requires even greater numbers of military to help trained social workers and other first responders do that sorting.

All concluded that the best way to help refugees is to heal the “root” causes of migration. Yet, assisting good local leadership struggling in the “sending” countries is difficult in the midst of a civil war or strong insurgency (Syria, Somalia, Boko Haran), and the consensus was that the UN or the African Union could and should help strengthen and monitor troubled governments before they enter into crisis. Moreover, as Laudato Si, warns us, ruthless exploitation of our common home’s resources by greedy individuals or multi-national corporations can have a devastating impact on surrounding populations. In times of crisis humans have been known to cooperate to restrict such exploitation (moratoriums on hunting or fishing until populations are rebuilt, for example) and military have been used together with their neighboring groups to enforce such balancing laws. Indeed, in many international exchanges, the military to military friendships formed in these activities or even in combined training events allow good example (along with prayer) to influence military in the “root” countries—which can then be a stabilizing influence among fragile populations.

An additional discussion ensued at the General Assembly concerning the methods and the ability of AMI to assist all our member nation’s military in behaving the way Christ Our Lord calls us to act. Because many if not all young military engage in social media, that seemed to be the most available avenue to add “insight and encouragement” to those trying to be merciful while dealing with refugees--or any other issues involving the moral component of military life. Indeed, greater use of e-mail and any other venues would allow ongoing communication among member delegations during the year about the urgent topics discussed, and working subgroups could elaborate on such topics that might be of helpful insight to their members, be mutually supportive of one another’s struggles, and offer a deeply Catholic lay viewpoint from within the military to other NGOs or any bishops or organizations the Vatican might suggest.

Such networking throughout the year would enable the times that AMI members are together at events beyond the General Assembly (PMI to Lourdes, for example, or having a

booth for young military at the World Youth Day, or even spontaneous opportunities during joint military exercises) to become fertile ground for helping each other show mercy and grow in grace. Yet fostering such ongoing communication would require greater personnel resources, and consequently greater financial support, to manage the social media postings. Guidance about such directions will be sought from member delegations, from bishops, and from Vatican authorities this year. In the years to come, AMI will deploy activities as a mainly educational NGO, creating awareness about the Catholic military's perspective.

Secretariat of AMI
Nelleke Swinkels – van de Vorst
AMI Secretary General
Esdoornstraat 21
5682 CM Best - NL
Fax 0031 – 499 374444
Tel: 0031 – 6 54796857
E-mail: nellekeswinkels@onsbrabantnet.nl
Website: <http://www.ami-international.org>