

**Opening words by the Principal Director of Personnel on behalf of the Netherlands Minister of Defence, for the Apostolat Militaire International (AMI) conference  
Monday 19 September, 09.00 hrs - 09.10 hrs.**

Welcome ladies and gentlemen, dear members and friends of AMI,

During this conference, your talks will centre around, among other topics, the theme of ‘The consequences of armed conflicts, especially for Catholic soldiers and their families in the background of Laudato Si’. Now I must confess, I did have to do some research on the precise meaning of Laudato Si before coming here. I soon discovered that it was an impressive encyclical letter, in which the Pope called upon us all, to respect the Earth and its most vulnerable inhabitants.

In it, he called for a drastic change.

A change that would see a shift of focus in our economy, society, politics and the church, towards the conservation of the earth for future generations, as well as the improvement of the living conditions of the vulnerable.

An important message, in these turbulent times. For centuries we have viewed the earth as an inexhaustible wellspring of resources. Resources which, moreover, are unfairly distributed among the planet’s population. Only a small part of mankind truly profits from the riches the Earth provides us with, as a large majority of the human population has to make do with what is left over. Not to mention the other inhabitants of our planet that are also deprived. Animals, both in the wild and those held for factory farming, as well as the forests, oceans and rivers, are suffering due to our lifestyle.

Our planet can only take so much. If we continue as we are, future generations will be confronted with the detrimental effects of our actions. Their oceans will be full of plastic, instead of fish. Vast rainforests will be a thing of the past, replaced by acres as far as the eye can see, filled with soy crops to feed our cattle. They will be confronted with desertification and severe droughts as a result of climate change. The people most affected by these changes will not sit back and wait. The flows of migrants and refugees are increasing. The fight for access to potable

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water and safe living environments is increasing. In a world that sees such unfair distribution of resources, people will take matters into their own hands in an attempt to resolve this inequality, whether we like it or not.

Taking good care of our planet, for instance by acting in accordance with Laudato Si, will have a positive effect on the stability in the world. It is in all of our interests to take to heart the lessons given in Laudato Si.

Not just by discussing these topics during this conference, but also by asking ourselves the concrete question of what we can contribute. Should we use our car for short trips? Should I compensate my CO2 emissions after a flight? Could I change to green power? Should I eat less meat or eat it less often?

As the Principal Director of Personnel, I aim to make the Netherlands Defence Organisation into a sustainably deployable organisation, meaning our personnel are healthy, motivated and well-trained. They should be aware that they are valuable to the labour market, both inside and outside of Defence. They should be proud of our organisation, and proud of our communal achievements. This also means, though, that they have to be able to cope with adversity, to overcome illness and able to handle the terrible situations that at times we, unfortunately, have to expose our people to. They have to show resilience when faced with adversity and find comfort in knowing that they can count on each other when needed.

Spiritual welfare is vital in this respect. Our spiritual welfare service is a moral beacon, lending a sense of peace and reflection during our daily realities. Allowing our people not to discuss objectives, results and numbers for once, but to simply have a good talk, face to face. To talk about exactly those topics that are truly dear to them. How's everything at home? What happened last week? How does that make you feel in hindsight? What cheers you up? Who do you miss? Taking a step back from the harsh reality of our world from time to time is good for

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everybody. It is for that reason that I am proud of Defence for having such highly motivated spiritual welfare personnel, who accompany our troops wherever they go. Always at hand, perhaps needed even more so when they are not actively called on. Along with all other Defence personnel, they help to protect what is truly dear to us. They protect our most important asset, our colleagues, our people.

The subtitle of *Laudato Si*, 'on care for our common home', therefore fits seamlessly with the Netherlands Defence Organisation's motto of 'protecting what is dear to us'. In a troubled world, full of danger, we must do everything we can to protect the most vulnerable. The armed forces play a part in this, but so do the churches, making the spiritual welfare officers who bring these two worlds together such a powerful connecting link. They have done so for more than 100 years, since the Dutch Queen Wilhelmina instated the first four chaplains on 28 August 1914.

I myself have often come into contact with spiritual welfare during my operational postings and deployments. I have had the pleasure of regularly witnessing up close the tremendous work done by spiritual welfare officers of all denominations. I would go as far as to say that the presence of spiritual welfare officers is a vital requirement for the successful execution of a military task far from home. Despite having no preference for one denomination over another in my official position, I would still like to share a very personal experience with you.

Although I come from a Protestant family background, I have always felt a special bond with Catholic chaplains. At the start of my career, a good 35 years ago, I experienced a sense of struggle with myself and my surroundings, much like many young people at that age do. I had been posted on board a naval frigate and it was there that I came into contact with a spiritual welfare officer, a chaplain. My contact with him helped me to further myself, to such an extent that I can now say that I owe an important part of my development as a military officer to him. Unfortunately, he passed away far too young. I carry him in my heart though, and I have kept a photograph of him ever since that formative period of my life.

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Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour to welcome you to the Netherlands on behalf of the Minister of Defence. I wish you all an inspiring conference, filled with new insights and meaningful new friendships, and I hope you will continue your active contribution to making our world a more pleasant and a more just one.