

AMI's role as an NGO: invitations, opportunities and challenges

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Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

1. Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts about the future development of the International Military Apostolate, or in French: the Apostolat Militaire International, in abbreviation: AMI, which means 'friend'.

In terms of an opposition between 'friend or foe', AMI does something quite remarkable.

It gathers military from different countries, which often did conduct wars against one another; so this truly is a context in which 'friendship' has a specific salience.

This year, AMI's conference seems to be even more urgent than it already was. The globalized world is in turmoil of accumulating changes, with old conflicts restarting and new upcoming conflicts and problems at the horizon. Military practice will no doubt follow these developments - in fact it already is part of them, and they need to be thoroughly reflected upon - even more so, when religion, whether we like it or not, is a key factor in legitimizing armed conflicts. Catholic soldiers are being challenged here, by the events themselves and in their social environment, by those who regard religion a main cause for conflict. Catholic soldiers all over the world must respond to this challenge, and AMI is fit to provide views and tools for this important task.

As a more personal introductory remark I would like to say, that my view on world history basically is a Christian one; my inspiration here is taken from St. Augustin, and especially the Augustinian realism about the power of sin in world history. For me this also implies that I do not have the expectation that God's Kingdom of Justice and Peace will be fully realized within world history. The Kingdom will be fulfilled by God and through God's grace and it will transcend our historical contingencies. Yet, Christ has called peacemakers blessed (Mt.5:9). So here is why for me as a Christian it is possible and legitimate to think over the role of AMI in a practice of future peace making, without expecting or suggesting that after our human efforts the Kingdom of God will be established. Any practice of peace making, whether a military or a civilian, basically is expressing hope and is putting into practice what is supposed to be morally good or at least justifiable in the context of today's historical contingencies.

2. AMI's 'square of activities'

Over the last 51 years, AMI conferences have enabled their participants to exchange about the way they experience their personal life, and also to exchange the ways in which they experience their own military practices. And of course, both of these themes are not only interconnected with each other, but this twofold exchange of experiences is deepened by a sharing of Christian faith and religious practices, even on a ecumenical basis. This already vital triangle of exchange the experience of personal life, exchanging the experience of military practice and exchanging religious experiences and practices has been enriched through the component of reflection on the moral dimension of present and future military practice as it has been expressed in the Declaration of Rome and the Declaration of Berlin.

3. Today's contribution

By taking this square of activities during AMI's annual conferences as a starting point, I want to express that I am well aware that reflections about the future of AMI are part of an ongoing process. Last year in Santiago de Compostela the rich history of AMI has been presented to us in the jubilee book, which of course did provoke some thoughts about the future.

And of course during this year's conference, many of us already have shared some ideas about the opportunities they see for AMI's future.

In my contribution today I have no intention whatsoever to offer a comprehensive view on AMI. But perhaps part of my thoughts could function as elements of a framework for future policy development. Some of my thoughts may be dreams. But an organization that never dreams, will never reach its objectives. An organization that allows for dreaming, may realize part of its dreams. So please allow me to start dreaming.

4. Lay apostolate

My first suggestion for today is to take AMI as it officially is: a Catholic organization, NGO, with a mandate for lay apostolate. In my opinion, the best way to think about the future of any organization is to reflect on its mission. Well then, AMI has different tasks, which essentially are based on the Decree for the lay apostolate of the Second Vatican Council **Apostolicam Actuositatem** dating from 1965,¹ and St. John Paul II's post synodal Apostolic Exhortation **Christifidelis Laici**,² dating from 1988.

¹ E.g. AA nr. 7: The laity must take up the renewal of the temporal order as their own special obligation. Led by the light of the Gospel and the mind of the Church and motivated by Christian charity, they must act directly and in a definite way in the temporal sphere. As citizens they must cooperate with other citizens with their own particular skill and on their own responsibility. Everywhere and in all things they must seek the justice of God's kingdom. The temporal order must be renewed in such a way that, without detriment to its own proper laws, it may be brought into conformity with the higher principles of the Christian life and adapted to the shifting circumstances of time, place, and peoples. Preeminent among the works of this type of apostolate

These two documents that have been discussed by AMI in Slovenia (in the contribution of the then military bishop of the UK), sketch the role of the laity as 'salt of the earth' or 'light of the world'. It is a huge task which Jesus assigned to His disciples: to help the world to function in a way that it minimizes the ways it blocks the breakthrough of the Kingdom of God and promote justice as peace as much as possible. Essentially the documents elaborate social tasks of the laity, in society, in combination with proper forms of witnessing as believers. They elaborate ways for lay persons, like military are, to be and to work in the world as Christians, however without turning the back to the Church.

5. AMI's objectives

Monsignor Freistetter has summarized AMI's objectives in the Jubilee book. I just mention them once again.

- A. To promote at national and international level the affirmation of a Christian vision of military life and of the values that characterizes this vision;
- B. To promote and support international understanding and cooperation, as a contribution to strengthening peace in the world;
- C. To study together, in the light of the Gospel and the teachings of the Church, the spiritual, moral and social problems peculiar to the military sphere.
- D. To keep an open mind towards ecumenical work;
- E. To make known the activities of AMI in countries or to associations and organizations who are not yet members.

In my opinion these five objectives mirror quite well the practice of AMI conferences as I have experienced them from 1990 on. For me, there CAN BE NO doubt that these objectives still are relevant: relevant for the national delegations, relevant for the countries where the participants come from and their military, relevant at the international level. And we can be sure too that these objectives

is that of Christian social action, which the sacred synod desires to see extended to the whole temporal sphere, including culture.

²E.g.: CF no. 15: The "world" thus becomes the place and the means for the lay faithful to fulfill their Christian vocation, because the world itself is destined to glorify God the Father in Christ. The Council is able then to indicate the proper and special sense of the divine vocation, which is directed to the lay faithful. They are not called to abandon the position that they have in the world. Baptism does not take them from the world at all, as the apostle Paul points out: "So, brethren, in whatever state each was called, there let him remain with God" (1 Cor 7:24). On the contrary, he entrusts a vocation to them that properly concerns their situation in the world. The lay faithful, in fact, "are called by God so that they, led by the spirit of the Gospel, might contribute to the sanctification of the world, as from within like leaven, by fulfilling their own particular duties. Thus, especially in this way of life, resplendent in faith, hope and charity they manifest Christ to others"(37). Thus for the lay faithful, to be present and active in the world is not only an anthropological and sociological reality, but in a specific way, a theological and ecclesiological reality as well. In fact, in their situation in the world God manifests his plan and communicates to them their particular vocation of "seeking the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God"(38).

are relevant for the Vatican, too. This is certainly so, because otherwise the Vatican certainly would not have provided an official status to AMI as a Catholic NGO.

6. AMI as an NGO: The Catholic Church

As far as I see, the approval of the status of AMI as an official Catholic NGO provides AMI with unique opportunities. Worldwide, AMI is a unique organization, which can add expertise to all sorts of podiums. One important type of podium of course is the official gatherings of Catholic NGOs, where they may add expertise to the already present expertise of Justice and Peace and Pax Christi International and organizations like the Jesuit Refugee Service.

Basically these and similar Catholic peace organizations work in the same domain as AMI, but from different perspectives, with different responsibilities, different objectives and different instruments. In my view, the recognition by the Vatican of AMI as an NGO must be seen as an invitation to participation in common processes with the other Catholic NGOs and with the Vatican itself.

I honestly think that AMI should not be too modest on an international Catholic podium. I'd like to encourage you to go on sharing your experience and optimizing this. I think that it is important for the Church and its peace efforts, that AMI likewise puts forward its experiences, practices and views. Such an exchange is not just possibly fruitful for the other Catholic NGOs or AMI itself, but it can also contribute to the Vatican's ongoing evaluation of interpretations of Christian pacifism, the Just War tradition, and Just Peace. A lot of the work that AMI has done over the last decades may bear fruit in this context too. But of course this requires an ongoing smart type of networking and communication from the side of AMI. As I see it, there is a solid basis for that in the regular visits to Rome by our international steering committee. But of course, this could be extended towards common activities like common conferences in Rome, for example together with the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. If AMI can manage to bring AMI's conference to Rome in the near future, this could be an excellent combination of activities.

7. AMI as an NGO: The United Nations

In combination with its role in the Catholic Church, AMI could also take up a role as an NGO attending meetings of the United Nations. I think there are opportunities here, both in New York, Geneva and Vienna. What AMI might have to offer here is a concise contribution about the moral experience of the military, about the ethical quality of the functioning of armed forces, and, last but not least, options regarding the religious freedom of the military and their freedom of conscience. This could well take on the form of focused expert meetings in the immediate environment of UN meetings. New York, Geneva and Vienna do have different mandates inside the UN, so it is necessary to be well prepared. I think New York would be a good place to present a slightly reworked Declaration of Berlin; Geneva would be a good place to assist the UN in stimulating both human rights of soldiers and the

maintenance of human rights by soldiers. Catholic Social Teaching has a lot to say about this. One of the unique contributions AMI could make, would be the promotion of the freedom of religion and the freedom of the conscience of soldiers worldwide, both in terms of international legislation and in terms of policy development. So AMI would need both a program and representatives in all three cities.

8. AMI and other international podia

As an NGO, AMI could develop a practice of focused education into the ethics of military practice in international relations. I think AMI is a high potential organization in terms of education. Its expertise is unique, but its expertise is partly unknown. Education is a path par excellence to share knowledge and expertise.

One example of this may be the following. The Catholic Social teaching provides a solid basis for a strong commitment of AMI with equal treatment of women soldiers. AMI could develop an educational program for this topic, or for similar ones.

I am sure that AMI has the expertise to offer this type of education.

9. AMI and the national podia

Of course, when we are meeting here during conferences, we experience the international dimension of AMI. But AMI's task is not confined to the international conferences. It is not just worldwide; there are national tasks too. In fact, whenever AMI holds its conference in some country, most of the time the hosting country wants to show a good record in the drains of the quality of the military, the religious freedom of the soldiers and the position of role of military chaplaincy. In this respect the AMI conferences function a little bit like an informal monitoring process in the best sense of the word. Through the international visitors, initiatives for lay apostolate and military chaplaincy as well as military Ordinariates experience support and aid in strengthening their position and in the development of the way they function. So the willingness of countries to do some public relations may be helpful in strengthening national sectors of lay apostolate and military chaplaincies.

So that's what we are doing here in the Netherlands this year as well: offer a national practice of lay apostolate and chaplaincy for international reflection, while we hope we can learn from each other.

But there is more to the national level of AMI. In fact the results of AMI conferences are meant for implementation. One of the opportunities for AMI as an NGO could be in supporting this implementation on the national level.

The Netherlands, for example, is looking for ways to organize specific national AMI conferences, one in the preparation of the international conference, and one in its aftermath. Our ecumenical Christian organization ACOM provides us with a basic structure for this in terms of administration.

10. The Focus of AMI in the near future

Now let me elaborate a little bit about the focus of AMI in its near future.

So far I have sketched possibilities for future development. May be they are too ambitious, but that will leave you with some choice regarding what you are able to do and what you want to do.

I think that AMI in the near future must take up its role in terms of lay apostolate in new ways, regardless the level of its ambitions as NGO.

I think that for AMI it will be necessary to promote attention for religious freedom of soldiers in general, and the freedom of deployment of the Catholic faith and its practices in particular. To me this seems to be an essential part of lay apostolate: to stimulate young military to connect their life and work with the freedom of religion and the Christian faith in particular. To state this implies that AMI might better focus on younger generations of Catholic soldiers than we see at our conferences (I don't want to offend anybody and you can be sure that I include myself here among the older participants). In my conviction, we need to help the next generations of Catholic soldiers to connect with the Catholic faith and its traditions, as well as with the condition the Catholic church does provide in terms of offering a normative framework for military practices in the present and future. Such activity would perfectly fit in the objectives of AMI as Mgr. Freistetter has formulated the once again inlets year's jubilee book. One possible path to this is to organize a presence of young Catholic soldiers at the World Youth Days, and their preparations in dioceses.

But this is just one example....

11. Instruments

As I told you in the beginning of this contribution, I asked for allowance to dream.

Now let me end this contribution by summing up the instruments which AMI as an NGO might use:

1. Continuation and elaboration of good contacts in Rome.
2. Preparation of educational materials about specific issues like the freedom of religion of soldiers and an other about the relations between Christian faith and military practice- for different contexts. One tool for the letter could be a guide to the Catholic Social Teaching on War and Peace for young Catholic military.
3. The stimulation of modern networks of military lay apostolate, in forms that young military may used appeal to them.

12 Final Remarks

It may be the case that these tasks would lead to an even higher case load for the international presidency, which already has an immense task to fulfill. But I am sure that these proposed activities may well be supported by several networks around the Military Ordinariates and by national sectors of AMI in a sort of 'coalitions of the willing'.

In my experience it could even be possible to gain small amounts of financial support in the preparation of educational materials from the side of UN institutions.

The presidency's task would not be to do all this by itself, nor should it develop into an enterprise employing people, but it could have a task to coordinate the chosen priorities and lead the process. If all my dreams would come true, four things would change compared to present practices:

- A. The square of activities is extended with a fifth component. Education as the main focus of AMI as an NGO. The square becomes a pentagon.
- B. There will be the introduction of **systematic** representation of AMI in meetings of Catholic NGO's and in cities that function as UN capital cities: New York, Vienna, and Geneva.
- C. There will be the cooperation of coalitions of the willing of national delegations in between annual conferences.
- D. National delegations take up the responsibility for a systematic focus on implementation issues after the international conferences.

Underlying all these activities in AMI there must, and shall, be, a Christian spirituality which puts its trust in God, which acknowledges human responsibility and the need to study military practice in order to work for a future just peace.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am well aware that not everything I sketched will happen. Let it be. But one message I want to give to you while ending this contribution: practical and consistent choices are necessary for a solid future of AMI. An organization that recently has been invited by the Vatican must take up the challenge of an even wider responsibility and therefore set its priorities.

I thank you for your attention.

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