

## Spiritual Introduction at the AMI Conference in Kenya (2006)

Werner Freistetter



Bischofsvikar Dr. Werner Freistetter auf der AMI-Konferenz in Kenia mit Major Angela Munyao, der Verantwortlichen für die Organisation der Konferenz, Foto: AMI

1. This is a very special moment: AMI is for the first time holding a conference in Africa, here in Kenya. We can even call it a historical moment because it has a profound significance for our organization. We are deeply grateful to the Lord our God who certainly has guided us so we finally can be here, and we sincerely thank our hosts who have welcomed us with so much kindness and hospitality. So this moment is not only a historical one, but it has also a deep spiritual meaning for all of us. One of the main tasks of AMI is to bring soldiers together in an international catholic organization so that we can share different experiences, discuss common challenges and experience the fascinating reality of the Church, living in different peoples and nations, but united in faith and love by our Lord Jesus Christ. So this meeting here in Kenya is a very important step towards a more authentic realization of AMI's deepest spiritual and ecclesiastical aims.

2. The program of the coming days is certainly dense and demanding. But it will also be a time of great human and spiritual opportunity. We already have begun to know each other better, to talk to one another, to discover, yes, our different mentalities, ways of thinking and cultural patterns, but also a deep unity as brothers and sisters called to be one in Christ. And I can say with full confidence that we as guests have already received very much here in Kenya. We have had a first experience of the richness and diversity of your natural and cultural heritage, we were shown places and monuments remembering great moments of your history, but we were also invited to commemorate with you the terrible events that struck the people of Nairobi some years ago. All this has opened up our hearts and minds and enriched our souls. But one of the most impressive experiences has certainly been the Sunday Mass we were invited to celebrate together yesterday with His Excellency Bishop Alfred Rotich in the Resurrection Gardens, a moment of outstanding, intense and joyful celebration of our faith that has left everybody, I am sure, profoundly touched and spiritually strengthened.

Meetings like ours always provide great opportunities for a mutual human and spiritual enrichment. To this point I can only speak for myself, but after these few days here in Kenya I can already take with me three experiences as a lasting impression: Your way of joyful celebration of the faith, integrating mind and heart, body and soul; the great value of social relations and family ties, of sociability and solidarity in your society; and the profound and almost natural sense of religiosity, of openness to the mystery of God which is alive in your people. All this is important if we deal with values in general and with Christian values in particular. Values are not only an issue of the mind, but also of the heart. And we cannot formulate or define values by mere abstract reasoning, we must first have a real experience of values that guide and shape the life of our families, of our community and our culture, above all the values of love and kindness, of solidarity and mutual respect.

3. „Strengthening Christian Values within Armed Forces Worldwide“. This is the theme of our conference here in Kenya. This theme contains at the same time a challenge and a promise. It is a challenge because to promote Christian values worldwide is a demanding task. We are very often confronted with difficulties and obstacles of various kinds, due to cultural, social, ideological or political reasons. Often we are also confronted with outright enmity or silent indifference. But there is also a promise and a horizon of hope in our theme, not because we are perfect in our faith or in our human qualities, but because it is God Himself who will never abandon those who sincerely believe in Him. He will be close to all who try, with all their strength and acknowledging their weaknesses, to bear witness to the faith and to live according to the message

of Christ. This is our hope: That God will show us the right ways to reach out to the men and women serving as soldiers in our armies and to serve them as faithful witnesses of the Gospel.

“Christian Values”: This is a widely used concept, and often we simply presume that everybody has an idea what Christian values are, and we could indeed draw a list of Christian values as contained in the Holy Scriptures and reflected in our spiritual traditions or in theology. This is indeed a reflection we as AMI should undertake together, also because today the question of values is widely discussed as a very important issue, and wrong answers given to questions like “Are there common human values and how do they relate to cultural or religious differences?”, can sometimes produce serious, even tragic political and social consequences, as we all know. I think that we have to deal with such questions during the next days when we shall discuss the challenges of the family, of leadership or of secularization. In this speech I would like to offer you another approach, a more basic and spiritual one. I simply asked myself “Where do Christian values come from?”, “What is their origin?”, and I discovered the simple truth that all our Christian values have one source: God as He reveals Himself in Jesus Christ who invites us to live in a communion of love with Him and with our brothers and sisters. So these values are not mere concepts, but there is a relationship, a call, an invitation, an answer, a community of life. All this is centered around Jesus Christ. He calls us to follow Him, He invites us to live as children of God, through Him we reach out towards the coming Kingdom of Heavens.

4. Everyone of us has experienced, in his or her special way, this call and this invitation, and has encountered Jesus during the way of his or her personal life. It is this experience of relationship and community which is the very heart of our Christian existence, an experience offered to us again and again, in our prayers, in the Word of God, in the celebration of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. This profound religious dimension should constantly animate our reflections and discussions, maybe in a more implicit way, but certainly as the spiritual background and as the animating centre of all our thoughts and activities. In this respect, it could even be helpful to take a look, from time to time, at the pictures on the walls of our room where we shall spend several days (the Samaritan Woman; the Discourse on the Mountain; Moses with the Ten Commandments and the Golden Calf; “God is Love”, the mystery of the Cross and the faithful who embrace the world). They show us how Jesus leads us, step by step, to a deeper understanding of the faith; they remind us of God’s Law of Life as opposed to greed, lust and love of power, symbolized by the Golden Calf; they show Christ, the

“New Moses”, teaching His “New Law”, the Beatitudes; finally, we are reminded of the fundamental truth, the central mystery of our faith: “God is Love”, and we shall love Him above everything and our brothers and sisters as ourselves.

5. As Christians, we live our lives out of this experience, guided by this great vision of the faith. As Christian soldiers we serve, animated by our faith, in our armies, committed to secure peace and security. We all know the tensions and challenges that characterize our service as Christians in the armed forces. But this is our special vocation: Christ has called us to be His faithful witnesses in our armies, in our communities and in our societies. So let me conclude with a quotation which, even if it does not explicitly mention soldiers, describes exactly the vocation of Christian soldiers in their specific environment. In his Post-Synodal Exhortation “Ecclesia in Africa” (1995), Pope John Paul II reminds us: “In the pluralistic societies of our day, it is especially due to the commitment of Catholics in public life that the Church can exercise a positive influence. Whether they be professionals or teachers, businessmen or civil servants, law enforcement agents or politicians, Catholics are expected to bear witness to goodness, truth, justice and love of God in their daily life. ‘The task of the faithful lay person ... is to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, especially in those places where only a lay person is able to render the Church present’”.

A last thought: Kenya’s Coats of Arms bear the motto “Harambee”, and I have learned during the last days that this means “to pull together”. I think we could easily adopt this motto for the days to come, it would even be a good guideline for AMI, because only together, learning from one another and combining our forces, we have a chance to meet the manifold challenges of our days and to become, with God’s grace and with His help, salt and light for our brothers and sisters.