



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE MILITARY CHAPLAINS

Dear Military Chaplains,

1. I am pleased to extend to you my greeting on the occasion of the course of formation in humanitarian law, organized jointly by the Congregation for Bishops and the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace.

I desire to express my pleasure at the care these two Vatican offices have taken for some time to prepare this session in accord with the commitment made by the Holy See during the 27th International Conference of the Red Cross and the Red Crescent (1999).

Moreover, I also wish to thank the qualified experts who have generously contributed their outstanding expertise for the success of the course.

Almost all the Military Ordinariates have sent their representatives to your course: this proves the value of the initiative that is meant to be a clear sign of the importance that the Holy See attaches to humanitarian law as a protection of the dignity of the human person even in the tragic context of war.

2. It is precisely when armed conflict erupts that the need for regulations to curb the brutality of the warfare becomes urgent.

Down the centuries, the consciousness of this urgent need has gradually led to the formation of a real juridical *corpus*, defined as "international humanitarian law". This body of law has been developed thanks to the maturation of principles inherent in the Christian message.

As I have had the opportunity to say in the past to the members of the International Institute of Humanitarian Law, Christianity "offers this development a basis in its affirmation of man's

autonomous value and pre-eminent dignity as a person with his own individuality, complete in his essential constitution, and endowed with rational consciousness and freedom of will. In past centuries too, the Christian view of man inspired the tendency to mitigate the traditional ferocity of war, so as to ensure more humane treatment for those involved in the hostilities. It made a decisive contribution to the affirmation, both morally and in practice, of the rules of humaneness and justice that are now, in duly modernized and specified form, the nucleus of our present-day international conventions" (18 May 1982; *ORE*, 14 June 1982, p. 12).

3. Military chaplains, inspired by Christ's love, are called by their special vocation to witness that even in the midst of the harshest combats, it is always possible, and only right, to respect the dignity of the military adversary, the dignity of civilian victims, the indelible dignity of every human being involved in armed conflict. In this way, moreover, the reconciliation is fostered that will be necessary for re-establishing peace when the war is over.

Inter arma caritas (charity under arms) was the significant password of the International Committee of the Red Cross in the early days, an eloquent symbol of the Christian motivation that inspired the Genevan, Henri Dunant, who founded this admirable organization, whose motivation should never be forgotten.

As Catholic military chaplains, in addition to carrying out your specific religious ministry, you must not fail to make your contribution to giving military staff an appropriate education in the values that motivate humanitarian law and make it not merely a juridical code, but first and foremost an ethical code.

4. Your course is taking place at a difficult moment in history, when the world once again is hearing the clash of arms. The thought of the victims and the destruction and suffering caused by armed conflict brings ever-deeper anxiety and great sorrow.

By now, it should be clear to all that the use of war as a means of resolving disputes between States was rejected, even before the UN Charter, by the consciences of the majority of humanity, except in the case of legitimate defence against an aggressor. The vast contemporary movement in favour of peace - which, according to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, is more than "the simple absence of war" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 78) - demonstrates this conviction of people of every continent and culture.

In this context, the influence of the different religions in sustaining the quest for peace is a reason for comfort and hope. In our view of faith, peace, even if it is the fruit of political agreements and understanding between individuals and peoples, is the gift of God, whom we should insistently invoke with prayer and penance. Without conversion of heart there is no peace! Peace can only be achieved through love!

Right now we are all asked to work and pray so that war may disappear from the horizon of humanity.

With these hopes, I formulate my best wishes that the course of formation may be profitable to you, dear chaplains, to whom I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing which I gladly extend to the organizers, lecturers and other collaborators.

From the Vatican, 24 March 2003.

JOHN PAUL II

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