



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO THE THIRD INTERNATIONAL AND INTERDENOMINATIONAL
CONFERENCE OF CHIEF MILITARY CHAPLAINS
OF EUROPE AND NORTH AMERICA**

Thursday, 6 February 1992

Dear Military Chaplains, I am pleased to welcome the participants in the *Third International and Interdenominational Conference of Chief Military Chaplains of Europe and North America*. You represent many religious denominations and I greet you in the words of the Apostle Paul: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father" (Col. 1:2). I thank Archbishop Marra, Military Ordinary for Italy, for his kind words of presentation on your behalf. I greet the Military Personnel who are present with you, including General Domenico Corcione, Chief of Staff for Defence, and the other Chiefs of Staff of the Italian Armed Forces. Our meeting gives me consolation and hope because I have always considered pastoral work among the military as a very important field. Your Conference, meeting for the third time, after a promising beginning at Stuttgart and a second meeting at Lübbecke, gives me the opportunity to express once more *my lively appreciation of the valuable pastoral work* in which you are engaged among military personnel and their families. Glancing at the list of twenty-three nations represented at this Conference, I note with pleasure how the presence of military chaplains is spreading to the *countries of Central and Eastern Europe*. In the Christian world there has always been a notable tradition of pastoral care to military personnel. The Catholic Church's respect and concern for those involved in military service is clearly expressed in the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution "Gaudium et Spes". There we read: "Those... who are dedicated to the service of their country and are members of armed forces should regard themselves as ministering to the security and freedom of their peoples, and while they are performing this duty in the right manner they are genuinely contributing to the establishment of peace" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 79). The Apostolic Constitution "Spirituali Militum Curae" of 21 April 1986, which governs the Church's activities in this field, likens Military Ordinariates to particular Churches or Dioceses, and compares the spiritual assistance which chaplains provide in barracks, camps, military schools and academies to that given in parishes. To your pastoral care are entrusted large numbers of young people and also regular servicemen and women called to serve their countries as guardians of their sovereignty and, where necessary, of the international order and of peace itself. As chaplains, you are aware of *the role of the word of God in forming people's consciences and hearts*, and in leading them to thoughts of peace and the correct use of freedom. In the fertile soil of freedom of conscience you must sow abundantly, so that also in the military sphere

individuals will act in a way which reflects deep reverence for God and, consequently, unfailing respect for the dignity and rights of other persons. The present moment of history presents a special challenge to military chaplains. Before you lies the task of educating others in *human and spiritual values*, and of helping them to place ethics above technology, moderation above passion, a sense of justice and brotherhood above hatred and oppression. A highly-qualified group like yours, by bringing together different cultures and experiences, will not fail to provide an indication of the best methods for building a true civilization of peace.³ There is another point I wish to make. Peace is a precious and fragile gift which God entrusts to man, to his conscience and to his reason. For you, two equally necessary duties derive from this. The first is the duty to work through the formation of consciences in order to *foster an authentic desire for peace*. The second duty is to *pray constantly for peace*, that God will grant this gift to the people of our times. On innumerable occasions I have prayed publicly for peace and appealed for prayers for peace, most recently during the Gulf War and the conflict in Yugoslavia. "With God nothing will be impossible" (Lk. 1:37). When human efforts seem doomed to failure, the power of God's Spirit can work deep within people's hearts, to quench hatred and kindle love. Peace can at times appear unattainable, but we are called to aspire to it at all times, trusting in God's promises. Pray, therefore, because by doing so you will render the greatest service to the people entrusted to your pastoral care, the people who are in the front line when peaceful coexistence collapses and war breaks out.⁴ Dear Chaplains, both in war and in peace may you be *always and only pastors of souls*. Be close to those entrusted to you. Help them with your prayer and exhort them to carry out with generosity the task assigned to them, which is to ensure, if necessary by the sacrifice of their lives, that others will enjoy security and peace. With these sentiments I invoke upon all of you the blessings of Almighty God. I would invite you to stand and join me in the prayer that Jesus himself taught us: "Pater Noster".

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