

Europe: A Culture of Peace and Solidarity (2006)

Werner Freistetter

I would like to start with a personal experience. I often have to deal with young soldiers during courses about ethical and moral issues of military life or of peace and security today. One of the basic questions the soldiers ask concerns the problem of defining the role and the identity of a soldier in a European army in our days. This may seem strange if one is not familiar with the profound structural, mental and human challenges armies are facing at present, but it can



serve as a good starting point for a more general reflection of my topic. Concerning armies in Europe today, we must bear in mind the enormous changes of the whole context of peace and security since 1989 and the consequences not only for the structure and the organization, but also for military strategies and the roles assigned to armed forces since then.

The concrete problem mentioned above is the following: Is Europe, for these young Austrian soldiers, a reality they can identify with? This is an important question, because we are moving more and more towards an intense cooperation between the armed forces of EU member states and an increasing integration of our nationally organized armies into a framework of a common security and defence policy. So the traditional approach, valid at least since the emergence of the modern nation state, that the soldier's identity derives essentially from his role to defend his home country, his nation, against an enemy attack, normally consisting of another organized army, does not provide satisfactory answers given the actual circumstances. It is easy to talk, as our political and military leaders often do, about common security strategies and the internationalization of the roles of armed forces, but soldiers always need something they can identify with, not only theoretically but also emotionally. So the question finally comes down to this: Is Europe a reality young soldiers can identify with on such a deep level of commitment that they are ready to put their lives at risk? For most of them, this is not the case, and their basic identity is still that of a soldier of the Austrian army who

happens to fulfil tasks and missions in a European or even in an international context and framework. Even if we concede that this idea does have a certain validity at present, this will not be the case in the times to come, and most soldiers are not really satisfied with this type of reasoning.

Armed forces, especially if there is a draft system in place, are in a certain way a mirror of society as a whole. So this experience, that for these young men and women “Europe” is more or less rather abstract notion, can easily be generalized. One of the main challenges of the process of European unification today is that many – certainly not all – European citizens are not really convinced of the achievements of the European Union, or they have doubts about the whole idea the EU stands for, or they are simply disoriented and annoyed because of the constant quarrels and sometimes even fundamental disagreements between European governments. Highly discussed deficiencies of the structure and the political culture of the EU, e.g. the lack of democratic participation or the impression to be confronted, as citizens, with a distant and self-serving bureaucratic machinery, add to a widespread uneasiness or sometimes even to an outright rejection of the whole project of European unity.

But there is another and much deeper root of this widely felt crisis of the European Union, and I mean by this the lack of a really inspiring and future-oriented political and moral vision of Europe, or at least the deficiency to convey this vision more convincingly to the European citizens. I remember very well the discussions in Austria, just before my country joined the EU in 1995. Many of our politicians spoke almost exclusively about economy, and especially of the economic advantages this step would provide for Austria. Of course, economy and related aspects have been and will be a very important dimension of European unity, but I personally regretted very much the widespread neglect of other considerations that would emphasize the deeper moral and human dimensions and their more profound meaning for the future of each citizen, for our countries and for Europe as a whole.

In times of crises, it is always good to go back to the fundamentals, to remember the roots and the original inspiration of our endeavours. This is the way proposed by a document published by the Commission of the Bishops’ Conferences of the European Community (COMECE) in May 2005, “The Evolution of the European Union and the Responsibility of Catholics”. This document starts with re-reading the famous Robert Schuman Declaration of 9 May 1950, with which this great statesman, at the time French Minister of Foreign Affairs, proposed to Germany and other interested states

the formation of the European Coal and Steel Community, with the explicit intent to serve the cause of peace by de-nationalizing these essential branches of the economies, especially important for armaments and armies, and integrating the attached national interests into a wider entity. The document of COMECE underlines the essential moral aim of this step which transcends mere economic and political considerations, calling it “an act of great spiritual dimension” (nr. 17), because it was based on an appeal for mutual forgiveness and reconciliation between France and Germany. The spiritual re-reading of this Declaration the Bishops undertake in their document, can provide an idea of the wide and deep horizon of the original inspiration of the project of European reunification.

The Declaration itself begins with words that, in all their simplicity, are still impressive and inspiring after more than 50 years: “World peace cannot be safeguarded without the making of creative efforts proportionate to the dangers which threaten it. The contribution which an organised and living Europe can bring to civilisation is indispensable to the maintenance of peaceful relations”. And with regard to the first steps to be made, the Declaration asserts: “Europe will not be made all at once. It will be built through concrete achievements which first create a de-facto solidarity. The coming together of the nations of Europe requires the elimination of the old-age opposition of France and Germany. Any action taken must in the first place concern these two countries.”

In their document, the Bishops point out several principles underlying this proposal, principles derived as conclusions drawn from European history (nr. 16):

- “Peace in Europe depends on the ability to surmount the inherited conflicts of many centuries and to find new ways of co-operating in the wake of reconciliation.”
- “The way towards peace would only be possible at the price of a co-operation which could never be forced but which depended on the voluntary participation of every one engaged in it.”
- “European unity would not be attained in one day or the next, but would be the result of a long historical process.”
- “European unity would be constructed with patience, not in the abstract, but through a certain number of clearly defined measures, both by solidarity in action and by continual sharing of responsibilities.”

So there is an often overlooked “prophetic scope”, as the bishops put it (nr. 17), of the Schuman Declaration. First, the declaration puts European unity

in the wider context of the maintenance of peace in the world. And secondly, there is an implicit, but intimate link between reconciliation, peace, liberty and solidarity contained in the document. Basically, despite of all the institutional considerations, the Declaration is an expression of a deep moral vision of European unity. With its appeal for forgiveness and reconciliation, it responded to the great desire for peace in Europe, after the unimaginable horrors and destructions of the Second World War. At the same time, it stated liberty and self-determination as basic principles of a future Europe, and it foresaw “a method of solidarity in the sharing of power”, beginning with solidarity by sharing material goods. The bishops conclude therefore: “It (the Schuman Declaration, WF) broke away from a form of politics which sought to achieve the maximum advantage in the short term from victory. These are, in our view, the reasons why the Schuman Declaration had the richness of a spiritual gesture. We can be inspired by it anew, as citizens and believers. An attentive study of this text can without doubt provide us with an important orientation for our current moral choices and political involvement.”

Looking back at this declaration, after more than 50 years, we can appreciate how much has been achieved for the peoples of Europe, in terms of peace and prosperity, in spite of all the difficulties and deficiencies of the existing institutions, the political disputes and the uncertainties about the future developments of the European Union. Nevertheless, demanding challenges are ahead, and one the biggest concerns for all who are interested in the project of European unity, consists in the gap between the developments on the institutional and political levels and the concrete lives and interests of many European citizens. And this is not only a question of failed public relations management, but I can see here a more profound contradiction: My impression is that the great challenges and aims of the European project are often formulated and carried out on the level of institutions and policies, more or less effectively, despite of all conflicting self-interests, but rather seldom they are the concern of the majority of European citizens. We live in a time of great historic challenges, but often we lack the moral force to meet them. Root causes for this can be the extreme individualism rampant in our societies, the experience of social fragmentation and isolation, disappointment and distrust in front of great projects and proclamations, the crisis of authentic human relations and values many people experience, sometimes even the lack of hope and the fear of the future.

All this very often results in a fear and inability of lasting moral and spiritual commitments. And here I can see one of the deepest causes for the crisis of the European project. Reconciliation, peace, liberty and solidarity are no

vague or mere emotional concepts, they rest instead on firm and lasting moral commitments to love, justice, respect of the other and a sense of authentic morality based on an informed conscience. A culture of peace and solidarity, contained in the guiding principles of the European Union, but not lived in the everyday life and in the moral commitments of the citizens, would be a dead letter. Here we have one of the most important points where the Church and all Christians are called to contribute effectively, out of our faith and the spiritual resources of our spiritual tradition, to a real and living culture of peace and solidarity in Europe.

And I would like to add a last point, coming back to my experience with our soldiers: Many of them returned home from international missions in the service of peace with a new motivation and a changed view on the questions of peace and solidarity. The concrete experience has enriched them personally, enlarged their horizons and in some way changed their mentality. The experience of a concrete service, of a concrete initiative of solidarity, can open hearts and minds, because this is the way we learn and develop our human capacities. And this is certainly in the line of the initiative and the Declaration of Robert Schuman: to promote a great vision with the help of a very concrete measure, a precious intuition also for our times, and for the way we can meet the manifold challenges for a new culture of peace and solidarity in Europe.

In ähnlicher Form abgedruckt in: Vizi, E. Sylvester/ Kucsera, Gergely T.: Europe in a World of Transformation, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest 2008, S. 125ff.