

Your Eminences,  
Brother Bishops and Priests,  
Dear Friends,

I am pleased to have this opportunity to join you on the occasion of your General Assembly. I thank Cardinal Oscar Rodríguez Maradiaga, President of *Caritas Internationalis*, for his kind words on your behalf, and I offer a cordial greeting to all of you and to the entire *Caritas* family. I also assure you of my gratitude and my prayerful good wishes for the works of Christian charity which you accomplish in countries throughout the world.

The primary reason for our meeting today is to thank God for the many graces poured out on the Church in the sixty years which have passed since the foundation of *Caritas Internationalis*. Following the horrors and devastation of the Second World War, Venerable Pius XII wanted to demonstrate the solidarity and concern of the entire Church in the face of so many situations of conflict and emergency in the world. He did this by creating an agency which, at the level of the universal Church, would promote greater communication, coordination and cooperation among the Church's numerous charitable agencies in the various countries (cf. John Paul II, Chirograph *Durante l'Ultima Cena*, 16 September 2004, No. 1). Blessed John Paul II further strengthened the bonds linking the individual national *Caritas* agencies to one another and to the Holy See by granting public canonical juridical personality to *Caritas Internationalis* (*ibid.*, 3). As a result, the international agency took on a particular role in the heart of the ecclesial community and was called to share, in collaboration with the ecclesiastical hierarchy, in the Church's mission of making manifest, through practical charity, that love which is God himself. Within the limits of the proper ends assigned to it, *Caritas Internationalis* thus carries out in the name of

the Church a specific task for the common good (cf. *Code of Canon Law*, can. 116 § 1).

Being in the heart of the Church, being able in a certain way to speak and act in her name for the common good, entails particular responsibilities in terms of the Christian life, both personal and in community. Only on the basis of a daily commitment to accept and to live fully the love of God can one promote the dignity of each and every human being. In my first Encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, I reaffirmed how critical the witness of charity is for the Church in our day. Through such witness, seen in the daily lives of her members, the Church reaches out to millions of persons and makes it possible for them to recognize and sense the love of God, who is always close to every man and woman in need. For us Christians, God himself is the source of charity; and charity is understood not merely as generic benevolence but as self-giving, even to the sacrifice of one's life for others in imitation of the example of Jesus Christ. The Church prolongs Christ's saving mission in time and space: she wishes to reach out to every human being, moved by a concern that every individual come to know that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ (cf. *Rom* 8:35).

*Caritas Internationalis* differs from other social agencies in that it is ecclesial; it shares in the mission of the Church. This is what the Popes have always wanted and this is what your General Assembly is called forcefully to re-affirm. It should be noted that *Caritas Internationalis* is basically made up of the various national *Caritas* agencies. In comparison with many Church institutions and associations devoted to charity, *Caritas* is distinctive; despite the variety of canonical forms taken by the national agencies, all of them offer an outstanding aid to Bishops in their pastoral exercise of charity. This entails a particular ecclesial responsibility: that of letting oneself be guided by the Church's Pastors. Since *Caritas Internationalis* has a universal profile and is

canonically a public juridical person, the Holy See is also responsible for following its activity and exercising oversight to ensure that its humanitarian and charitable activity, and the content of its documents, are completely in accord with the Apostolic See and the Church's Magisterium, and that it is administered in a competent and transparent manner. This distinctive identity remains the strength of *Caritas Internationalis*, and is what makes it uniquely effective.

I would also like to emphasize that your mission enables you to play an important role on the international level. The experience you have garnered in these years has taught you to be advocates within the international community of a sound anthropological vision, one nourished by Catholic teaching and committed to defending the dignity of all human life. Without a transcendent foundation, without a reference to God the Creator, without an appreciation of our eternal destiny, we risk falling prey to harmful ideologies. All that you say and do, the witness of your lives and activities, remains important and contributes to the advancement of the integral good of the human person. *Caritas Internationalis* is an organization charged with fostering communion between the universal Church and the particular Churches, as well as communion between all the faithful in the exercise of charity; at the same time it is called to help bring the Church's message to political and social life internationally. In the political sphere - and in all those areas directly affecting the lives of the poor - the faithful, especially the laity, enjoy broad freedom of activity. No one can claim to speak "officially" in the name of the entire lay faithful, or of all Catholics, in matters freely open to discussion (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 43; 88). On the other hand, all Catholics, and indeed all men and women, are called to act with purified consciences and generous hearts in resolutely promoting those values which I have often referred to as "non-negotiable". *Caritas Internationalis*, then,

is called to work in converting people's hearts in openness towards all our brothers and sisters, so that everyone, in full respect for his or her freedom and in the full acceptance of his or her personal responsibilities, may always and everywhere act for the common good, generously giving the best of himself or herself in the service of his or her brothers and sisters, particularly those in greatest need.

It is within this greater horizon, then, and in close collaboration with the Church's Pastors who are ultimately responsible for her witness of charity (cf. *Deus Caritas Est*, 32), that the national *Caritas* agencies are called to continue their vital witness to the mystery of God's healing and transforming love made manifest in Jesus Christ. The same holds true for *Caritas Internationalis*, which can rest assured that it will enjoy the assistance and support of the Holy See – particularly through the competent dicastery, the Pontifical Council *Cor Unum* – as it strives to carry out its mission.

Dear friends, as I entrust these thoughts to your reflection, I once more thank you for your generous efforts in the service of our brothers and sisters in need. To you, to your co-workers and to all engaged in the vast network of Catholic charities, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of strength and peace in the Lord.