

CARITAS – A SIGN OF GOD’S LOVE FOR HUMANITY



i am caritas

Dear friends

Whether you are a Caritas worker, one of our many volunteers or supporters, or you have ever been helped by a Caritas organisation, I am sure you will have noticed Caritas is not simply a non-governmental organisation – it is much more.

Caritas is a sign of the love of God for all humanity. It is a love that knows no bounds or boundaries. The name Caritas Internationalis means literally 'love between nations'. Caritas gives witness to God's love among us, a love for all people and especially for the poorest.

Caritas organisations around the world are deeply committed through their programmes to putting love into action. I am enormously proud of our work and grateful to the numerous women and men who give their spiritual gifts and professional skills day in day out to the service of the poorest. My invitation to you all is to share your experiences of what it means to you to be part of the Caritas community, and to manifest in words and stories how your action builds a theology of Caritas. "*Caritas – A Sign of God's Love for Humanity*" is a reflection which I hope will inspire you to delve deeper into how we are a visible sign and sacrament of God's love in our world, and how we need to bring together our actions and words.

The experiences of Caritas workers around the world help us to understand the essential connection between our work and our faith. When we encounter poverty and suffering, we find Jesus, and in Jesus we find God. So whether we are comforting the traumatised victims of violence and rape in the Congo, pulling

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survivors from an earthquake-shattered ruin in Peru, sheltering families made homeless by flooding in Bangladesh, or providing hot meals for the homeless in rich cities around the world, we are simultaneously responding to the call of the gospels to love our neighbour while finding God in the stranger to whom we offer our assistance.

Solidarity with the poor, however, is not only about being personally close to them, it is also about attending to the human causes of poverty in the world. It is right therefore that in this reflection we also consider our role in trying to establish a more just world. Justice and human promotion are an indispensable part of the mission of the Church, which is the advocate of the poor.

Today we face many new and complex challenges, and Caritas will only be able to respond effectively if we are clear about our own identity. I hope that this reflection will help to strengthen our hearts, to have what our Holy Father Benedict XVI in *Deus Caritas Est* (31,b) calls a "heart which sees", so that we can move forward together towards our common mission in support of all humanity.

Yours in Christ,

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President Caritas Internationalis

25 April 2009, Vatican City



CARITAS – A SIGN OF GOD’S LOVE FOR HUMANITY

A theological reflection

“God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him’ (4:16). These words from the *First Letter of John* express with remarkable clarity the heart of the Christian faith: the Christian image of God and the resulting image of mankind and its destiny.” (*Deus Caritas Est*: 1). In Jesus Christ we meet the mystery of love in person and know we are God’s children, but we are forever journeying towards that full encounter with God face to face, when we shall know who we are because we shall see Him as He is.

To share the good news of the Kingdom

The kernel of the message of Jesus is the announcement of the love of God that is expressed in the proclamation of His Reign. The Kingdom draws human history beyond itself, to its total fulfilment; but, at the same time, it is present in history now. This double dimension is expressed in the classic phrase:



the Kingdom is “already, but not yet fully” in history; it is coming. The Reign of God is a grace and, simultaneously, a responsibility. The life of the disciples of Jesus Christ is located between the gift and the task: “Inherit the kingdom prepared for you (...) for I was hungry and you gave me food” (Matt. 25:34-35).

The images of God’s Reign in the gospels derive from fundamental biblical themes: consolation, fertility, plenitude, mercy, the vision of God, children of God (cf. Matt. 5:5-10). All these terms have in common the affirmation of life in its different manifestations. Indeed, in the gospels, entry into the Kingdom means to enter into life (Mk. 9: 43 and 47). Encounter with our God who is love always summons us further on the pilgrimage toward the Kingdom. It invites us to discover anew who we are, faced with this mystery of love beyond our imagining.

So, given this biblical perspective, what role does the establishment of a just world have in the proclamation of the Kingdom? In recent decades, the Magisterium of the Church and theological reflection have insisted on an integral



Photos: Laura Sikes – Catholic Charities USA, Stefano Montesi – Caritas Roma

understanding of the proclamation of the gospel. The commitment to establish “righteousness and justice” (Genesis 18:19) – a classic biblical theme – is not prior to the proclamation of the Kingdom, but part of it. In the Roman Synod on “Justice in the World” (1971) the mission of the Church “includes the defence and the promotion of the dignity and the fundamental rights of the human person” (n. 37)¹.

The Church, Paul VI reminds us, “exists in order to evangelize” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 14), to proclaim the Kingdom of God through words and deeds. John Paul II said in his inaugural speech for the bishops’ Conference of Puebla (1979), that “the Church has learned that an indispensable part of its evangelizing mission is made up of works on behalf of justice and human promotion” (III, 2). And in an address to the

¹ We find a similar idea in the Paul VI’s writings about this issue (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1974) 29).



Photos: Caritas Australia, Pieter-Jan De Pue – Caritas Germany

bishops of Honduras, he affirmed: “It must not be forgotten that concern for the social dimension is part of the Church’s evangelizing mission and that human promotion is part of evangelization, because the latter tends towards the integral liberation of the person” (4 Dec. 2001). This point was taken up by Benedict XVI, in his address to the bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean at the Shrine of Aparecida in 2007: “We must remember that evangelization has always developed alongside the promotion of the human person and authentic Christian liberation.”² Furthermore, Benedict XVI affirmed that “the Church is the advocate of justice and of the poor.”

The conclusion is clear: social concern for justice and human promotion is obviously not the whole and only task of the Church, but it is an “essential” part of it.

² Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI Inaugural Session of the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, May 2007

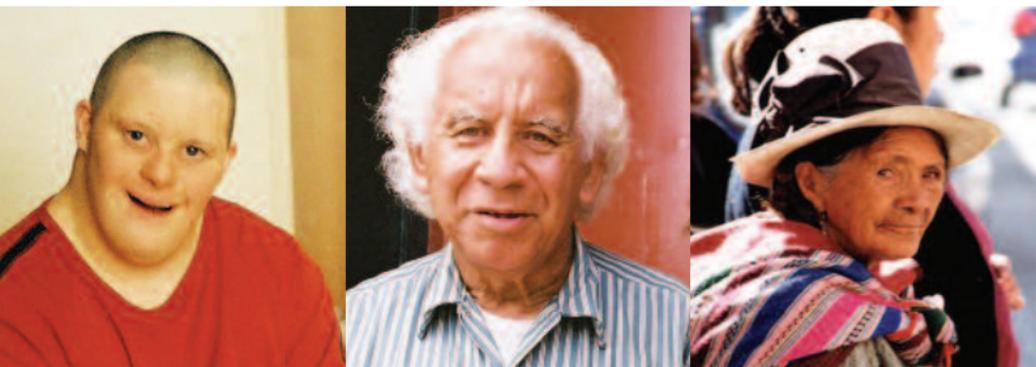


The task of Caritas in the world

Caritas is at the heart of the Church's mission, a sign of God's love for humanity in Jesus Christ. Caritas Internationalis means literally "love between nations", expressing our hope for the Kingdom of God. According to "*Deus Caritas Est*", "love needs to be organized if it is to be an ordered service to the community" (*Deus Caritas Est* 20). Caritas is an organized expression of the mission of the Church, giving witness to the presence of God's love among us, a love for all people and above all for the least, the 'insignificant' persons, the poor: it is the preferential option for the poor, emphasized by Benedict XVI in his Aparecida address. Solidarity with the poor implies being personally close to them and, at the same time, attending to the human causes of poverty in the world.

Pope Benedict has affirmed his intention "to call forth in the world renewed energy and commitment in the human response to God's love" (*Deus Caritas Est* 1.1). And he is well aware of the real sufferings in our world: poverty, hatred, war and social exclusion.³ His presentation of the commandment

³ *Deus Caritas Est* 1 and '*Fighting Poverty to Build Peace*',
Message for World Day of Peace, 2009



Photos: Aleksandra Pawloff, Laura Sikes – Catholic Charities USA, Beth Cohen – CRS

of love in the gospels is especially relevant for the task of Caritas. The gospels speak of the love of God and of neighbour, but the Pope underlines the profound unity of both: “Love of God and love of neighbour have become one: in the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself, and in Jesus we find God” (id. 15 and 18). The consequence is unavoidable: “Closing our eyes to our neighbour also blinds us to God” (id. 15).

Today the Church faces a new challenge in our global world. Benedict XVI said in his Message for the World Day of Peace (2009): “Fighting poverty requires attentive consideration of the complex phenomenon of globalization” (n.2). How can we be faithful to what we have received, from the gospels and the tradition of the Church, and faithful to the gift that God

offers in this new world in which humanity is bound together more closely than ever before? How can we face the challenges of climate change, which threatens the future flourishing of humanity? How do we respond to a new economic dynamism that affects old geopolitics and introduces new global players? How can the viewpoints of the poor and of developing countries be put forward in the framework of the global financial and economic crisis which bears social crisis in itself? How can our world benefit from a meaningful global governance that will be respected because it is democratic and represents in a balanced way the interests of all people?



Photo: Beth Cohen – CRS

Caritas has a key role to play in the Church's answer to these new challenges. It is at the service of the Church's response and not only to the suffering and injustices of a world economy that brings plenty to some and destitution and violence to others. It is an expression of what the Church is, as the sign and the sacrament of the "unity of the entire human race" (*Lumen Gentium* 1). And as such, through Caritas, the



Photo: David Snyder

Church shares “the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted.” And “*Gaudium Et Spes: 1*” continues “these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. (...) That is why this community realizes that it is truly linked with mankind and its history by the deepest of bonds.”

In this year of St. Paul, we remember how the Apostle to the Gentiles summoned the Church to open herself to all people, their histories and their cultures, and so become a better image of our Lord, in whom “there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3,28). We must move beyond narrow northern views, those of old Christendom, to discover the aspirations and the rights of all peoples and to be aware of their true needs, recalling the advice received by Paul from “the pillars” of the Church of Jerusalem: “Remember the poor” (Gal. 2:10).



For Caritas to be an effective sign of the Church's identity and mission, it needs to clarify its own identity, as a confederation of 164 member organisations. Christian identity is both given by our response to the gospels, and discovered as we encounter Christ in strangers. Caritas embodies this as it expresses the Church's outreach to those in need, the poor, regardless of who they are, and whatever their faith, if any. Caritas does this most effectively when its constituent institutions discover their identity with each other, in a common mission and vision.

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Caritas Internationalis Theology Commission



Photo: Khalil Ansara – CRS





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