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Caritas: the practice of Love by the Church as a “Community of Love”

(Speech to the General Assembly of *Caritas Internationalis*, Rome)

Your Eminences,

Dear Members of *Caritas Internationalis*,

I. I am delighted to be with you to celebrate the 60 years of *Caritas Internationalis*, and I would like to thank you for inviting me to speak at your General Assembly.

First of all, I would like to express a few words of recognition and gratitude to all those who, in one way or another, carry out charitable activities at the various national Caritas that you represent here, and dedicate their efforts to serving their neighbour, on behalf of the charity of Christ.

II. As you know, a few months ago I was appointed as President of the Pontifical Council *Cor Unum*. I would like to briefly outline a profile of this *Pontifical Council* by referring to the most important documents that have punctuated its existence and marked its evolution over the last forty years.

This Dicastery was founded by Pope Paul VI on 15 July 1971. This papal initiative, aimed at encouraging *human and Christian promotion*, responded to the Holy See’s wish to react to the overwhelming situation of poverty in some countries in the world. At the same time, it was designed to create a structure to enable coordination and unification of the Church’s efforts whilst intervening on behalf of the poorest. Taking a closer look, it becomes apparent that the origin of this decision is based on the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, in which in no. 88 the Council says: “The spirit of poverty and charity are the glory and witness of the Church of Christ. Those Christians are to be praised and supported, therefore, who volunteer their services to help other men and nations. Indeed, it is the duty of the whole People of God, following the word and example of the bishops, to alleviate as far as they are able the sufferings of the modern age. They should do this too, as was the ancient custom in the Church, out of the substance of their goods, and not only out of what is superfluous. The procedure of collecting and distributing aids, without being inflexible



and completely uniform, should nevertheless be carried on in an orderly fashion in dioceses, nations, and throughout the entire world..." (GS no. 88).

Regarding coordination with the charitable organisations of the Church, it should be emphasised that our activity is guided by the principle of the integral development of the human person. Therefore, it is not merely philanthropic and humanitarian assistance aimed at relieving a certain kind of distress, but also and above all it entails giving back to human persons all their dignity as children of God, and promoting an anthropology that also encompasses the religious dimension of human persons, namely their encounter with God.

In his Encyclical *Populorum progressio*, published in 1967, Pope Paul VI was already illuminating the great theme of the development of peoples, the splendour of truth and the gentle light of Christ's Charity. "He taught that life in Christ is the first and principal factor of development and he entrusted us with the task of travelling the path of development with all our heart and all our intelligence, that is to say with the ardour of charity and the wisdom of truth. It is the primordial truth of God's love, grace bestowed upon us, that opens our lives to gift and makes it possible to hope for a "development of the whole man and of all men" (Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate* no. 8)

The fundamental document for us is the Encyclical *Deus Caritas est*. Published in 2005, it presents an official doctrine on charity for the first time. For Pope Benedict XVI, the imperative and practice of charity, love of one's neighbour, are vitally important. The Church cannot renounce her proclamation, even though nowadays, at least in the Western world, a humanism without God seems to have become an integral and lasting part of the prevailing culture. Pope Jean Paul II spoke bitterly of countries where religion and the Christian life were once flourishing absolutely and capable of generating communities of living and active faith, which today have been radically transformed by the incessant spread of religious indifference, secularisation and atheism. This particularly concerns the nations of what is called the First World, where economic wellbeing and the rush to consume inspire and nourish a life lived "as if God didn't exist". Currently, faced with the serious problems of life, religious indifference and the total lack of meaning that is attributed to God are no less worrying nor deleterious than overt atheism. Together with enormous material, scientific and technological progress, the West is now experiencing a serious moral regression and a gradual "silent apostasy" (cf. *Christifideles Laici*, no. 34). Undoubtedly, since the beginning of his papacy, Pope Benedict XVI has considered this "religious indifference" and "silent apostasy" as the major challenge the Church has to take up today in her relations with the modern world. Therefore, he is more determined than ever to make our minds more aware and our faith more visible and more



active, in order to show the world that the Church's mission is deeply rooted in faith in God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The same is also undoubtedly true for *diakonia*. Indeed, together with proclamation of the Faith and the liturgy, *diakonia* fulfils the Church's mission.

In recent years, the theme of charity has expanded greatly, which also extends this Dicastery's field of action. Many new problems – such as the perception of and theological reflection on charity, the difference between the theology of charity and the social teaching of the Church, the ecclesial link between Catholic aid agencies, the motivations behind the charitable engagement of Christians, Catholic voluntary service and relations with public institutions – have emerged, which has obliged the Pontifical Council *Cor Unum* to initiate in-depth theological reflection on the concept of Charity and on which path, amongst others, should be taken by Catholic charity agencies in the light of *Deus Caritas est*. We should carry out this reflection and in-depth study together in order to be loyal to our faith in Jesus, which tells us: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (*Jn 13:35*).

This being so, we might wonder how we can ensure that the salt of Charity of so many faithful lay people, and consecrated people and their religious families, doesn't lose its flavour. How can we help faithful lay people and religious, who run charitable organisations or charity institutions that have proved their robustness over the years, to experience a new docility in the wind of Pentecost, and move from works of law to works of faith? How can we help faithful lay people and religious engaged on the frontlines of emergency situations (immigration, refugees, people displaced by war or natural disasters, prisons, the pastoral care of street children, etc.) to know how to “say” every day, in a credible way, the freshness of the evangelical proclamation in what they are and what they do? If the world we live in really is the place of the Gospel, then serving human development not only doesn't go against the worship of God, but also prepares it and is an authentic and necessary expression of it. All those calling themselves disciples of Christ won't find a neutral space in the work of serving other people, or even less a hindrance to this unique Love, but rather will be able to see within it a concrete fulfilment of their personal encounter with Jesus, and the spread of their faith and love for God. Moreover, this means that such work derives from a profound union with God and is based on the help of His grace more than human and material means; namely, these are works of faith rather than of law, fruits of the gratitude of a heart that sees and loves rather than seeking gratification from a life poor in love. “The Christian's programme,” says Pope Benedict XVI, “is ‘a heart which sees’. This heart sees where love is needed and acts accordingly” (*Deus Caritas est*, no. 31).



III. *Caritas Internationalis*

Caritas Internationalis is celebrating its 60th anniversary. As you know, it derives from an initiative of the Holy See, which wanted a *sui generis* confederation to provide a link of representation and cooperation for the national Caritas. I am sure that the celebration of this important anniversary will enable you to stop for a moment for some soul-searching and an analysis of the legal nature and running of the Confederation. While the Church of Vatican II is “**l’eccllesia semper reformanda, semper renovanda et purificanda**”, the members of *Caritas Internationalis* are likewise called on to renew and reform themselves in the spirit of this Council. Carrying out and managing charitable works is a task that cannot avoid the effort of making such an “update”. And the only possible condition for achieving this is to live in accordance with spiritual and pastoral wisdom, attentive to the signs of the times, open to hearing the Word of God and capable of combining the two loyalties – to God and to history – in the unique love of charity. This calls for a great deal of humility from us. The question we should ask ourselves is whether our charity is humble; whether we do what we do in view of a goal, an interest or a return, or in a totally selfless way. As Saint Paul said: “[Charity] is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres” (*1 Cor* 13:5-7). Saint Paul closely questions us: To what extent are we selfless when we do charitable work and serve the poor and the vulnerable? Are we seeking our own success, appreciation and development of our human power, or merely the Love of God and the poor to whom He has sent us? Are not our wealth and our financial means often an opportunity to overwhelm, put pressure on and humiliate the poor and to impose our ideological preferences on them? Is our work of the law or of faith? Is it motivated by the logic of interests, or by humble and selfless charity?

Our theological reflection over the next few days should have this objective, and the discussions on the legal structure of *Caritas Internationalis* should be aimed at guaranteeing its vocation to remain essentially and structurally an instrument of the charity of the Church.

Indeed, on 16 September 2004, Pope John Paul II, in his Chirograph “During the Last Supper”, granted this Confederation public canonical legal status. Through this act, he re-emphasised the importance of our organisation and wished **to unite it more closely to the Holy See to increasingly guarantee the specific nature of our witness of charity in the world**. Tomorrow you will have the opportunity to listen to His Excellency Msgr Arrieta speaking about the



development of legal aspects which, I repeat, in Church tradition have the role of increasingly guaranteeing the specific nature of our charisma.

IV. Views on the Pastoral Ministry of Charity today

As I outlined above, the Encyclical *Deus Caritas est*, is the reference and guidance document for all the charitable activities of the Catholic Church today.

At the beginning of his Encyclical, the Holy Father immediately points out that the source of all Charity is God and that the Son of God, who was incarnated and gave His life through love to save us, shows us the charity of the Father. The Church, in turn, continues the mission of the Son of God; it has no other mission. The Church continues to proclaim through the Word and through her works manifests that God is Love, and that through Love He wishes to save us in all our dimensions and move us towards our eternal destiny. The Church makes the light of her faith shine before us so that we may see her good works and glorify God. Commenting on Matthew 5:16 – “In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” – Father Pavel Florenskij, a Russian theologian and philosopher, who died as a martyr to Stalin's barbarism, pointed out that the expression “good works” does not at all mean “good actions” in the philanthropic and moralistic sense of the term; rather it means “beautiful actions”, luminous and harmonious revelations of the spiritual personality. Above all, the expression evokes a radiant handsome face, a beauty through which the inner light of mankind inhabited by God spreads outwards; overcome by the irresistible nature of this light, people praise the Heavenly Father, whose image thus shines brightly on earth.

The witness of charity, the privileged way of the Proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus, takes place through the shining of the beauty of the heart in the actions of Christ's disciples inwardly transfigured by the Spirit: the place where charity spreads the inwardness transformed by the Spirit, where the beauty that saves appears, where the Heavenly Father is praised and the unity of the disciples of Jesus grows, united to Him as disciples of His crucified and resurrected Love (cf. P. Florenskij, *Le porte regali. Saggio sull'icona*, Adelphi, Milan 1997, 50).



Thus, “For the Church, charity is not a kind of welfare activity which could equally well be left to others, but is a part of her nature, an indispensable expression of her very being” (cf. *Deus Caritas est* no. 25). Therefore, through her service the Church manifests the charity of Christ.

This implies that the Church is the subject directly responsible for the service of charity and that her charitable organisations constitute an *opus proprium*, a task in accordance with her nature, and participate in her mission (cf. *Deus Caritas est*, no. 29). Participation means in some way being an instrument, but never the origin or end of what one serves. Moreover, I believe it is important to understand that our charitable organisations are located within the Church and not alongside her. A Caritas that wasn't an ecclesial expression would have no meaning or existence. The Church cannot be considered as a partner of Catholic organisations. They are the organisations that take part in her mission. This gives us a responsibility, a vocation and a special commitment: to be at the heart of the Church as the most beautiful and most real manifestation and expression of her essence, namely of the charity of God.

Besides, as the Church has an episcopal structure, charitable organisations report to bishops who, as the successors of the Apostles, bear a prime responsibility in the life of the Church and therefore the implementation of DIAKONIA. So it is necessary that charitable organisations are really able to work in full communion and deep connection with the local bishop, and in accordance with pastoral guidelines, in order to be fully integrated within the mission of the Church. Bishops also have a special duty not to abandon their charity organisations, but rather to help and promote them, and consider them as a central aspect of their pastoral responsibility towards the People of God. I strongly encourage the bishops here today to never forget or neglect to pay very special attention to the works of charity of the Church and the organisations that manage them in the name of the Church as a “Community of Love”.

This service of Charity is part of the three missions that express the profound nature of the Church. They are called *Diakonia*, *Leiturgia* and *Martyria*, and cannot be separated. Often, the presence of the Church through the service of charity is the only means of evangelising. But in this proclamation, what do we want to bear witness to? It isn't a question of proselytising. “Those who practise charity in the Church's name will never seek to impose the Church's faith upon others” (*Deus Caritas est*, no. 31 c). Indeed, it means bearing witness to a love that comes not from us but from God. We must express the compassion, love and salvation of God fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Filling the world with light, being the salt and the light, is how the Lord described the mission of His disciples. Taking the good news of God's Love to the ends of the earth is what Christians should dedicate their lives to, in one way or another. Some of you might ask how you can



communicate this God's Love, this knowledge of Christ, to others. In our charitable activities, should we explicitly proclaim Jesus Christ and His Gospel? I would reply that you must bring Jesus Christ to others in a natural and simple way, as perfume brings a good smell, salt gives a pleasant and delicious taste, and fire radiates heat, light and flames, by living exactly as you do in the world, devoted to your professional work, and in the bosom of your family if you are married, taking part in all the noble aspirations of mankind, and respecting everyone's legitimate freedom, so that "if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behaviour and faith of the disciples of Jesus" (cf. *1 Pet* 3:1-2). Ordinary life may be holy and full of God. And the Lord calls on us to sanctify our everyday tasks, because therein too lies Christian perfection. Today, dear Friends, the tragedy of modern mankind is not lacking clothing and housing. The most tragic hunger and the most terrible anguish is not lack of food. It's much more about the absence of God and the lack of true love, the love that was revealed to us on the Cross. "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (*Mt* 4:4).

One of the signs of the times is the proliferation of philanthropic organisations and humanitarian aid and solidarity structures. Therefore, the witness of charity is becoming increasingly important. There is a risk of turning the service of charity into a civil service function, namely to separate the work of charity from the person who acts. Yet, in the mission of the Church, bearing witness is inseparably linked to the person of the witness. The diaconal mission of the Church cannot be limited to an objective and neutral presentation of its object. It only takes on its full meaning when those who commit themselves internalise it and become the incarnation of the compassion and Love of God, as they should be the visible and emotional presence and the paternal closeness of God for those who are suffering and experiencing sickness, disasters, ordeals and death. We cannot disassociate the person who bears witness from the mission. This is why we are all personally called on not to turn charity into a mere "profession", and to be aware that we personally are bearers of a gift: the treasure of the Word and Love of God which transcend us. Here's the meaning of the word witness: to be there for someone, and not for ourselves. Saint Maximus the Confessor is forthright on this point: "Love is not only manifested by distributing wealth, but much more by distributing the Word of God and personally engaging in serving others", in the name of God our Father. This is obviously where we can give space to God. It is therefore necessary, says the Holy Father, that: "Those who work for the Church's charitable organisations must be distinguished by the fact that they do not merely meet the needs of the moment, but they dedicate themselves to others with heartfelt concern, enabling them to experience the richness of their humanity. Consequently, in addition to their necessary professional training, these charity



workers need a ‘formation of the heart’: they need to be led to that encounter with God in Christ which awakens their love and opens their spirits to others. As a result, love of neighbour will no longer be for them a commandment imposed, so to speak, from without, but a consequence deriving from their faith, a faith which becomes active through love” *fides operans per caritatem* (Ga 5:6) (cf. *Deus Caritas est*, no. 31).

I would like to conclude with some words of the Holy Father that sum up my reflection:

“Charity, furthermore, cannot be used as a means of engaging in what is nowadays considered proselytism. Love is free; it is not practised as a way of achieving other ends. But this does not mean that charitable activity must somehow leave God and Christ aside. For it is always concerned with the whole man. Often the deepest cause of suffering is the very absence of God. Those who practice charity in the Church's name will never seek to impose the Church's faith upon others. They realise that a pure and generous love is the best witness to the God in whom we believe and by whom we are driven to love... It is the responsibility of the Church's charitable organisations to reinforce this awareness in their members, so that by their activity – as well as their words, their silence, their example – they may be credible witnesses to Christ” (*Deus Caritas est* no. 31).

Bread is important and freedom is important, but the most important thing of all is our Faith in the God of Love and our kneeling to worship and serve Him by serving the poor.

Therefore, the mission of *Cor Unum* consists in maintaining these fundamental elements so that the particularity of the Christian and ecclesial approach to suffering and poverty may be respected.

Thank you for your attention and your forbearance in listening to me.