**Caritas Internationalis General Assembly** 24.5.2018 Rome

**Keynote address – With Passion for the Church and the World**

Your eminences, distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen, sisters and brothers in Christ, good morning! And warm greetings from the Lutheran World Federation, a global communion of 148 member churches, who share a common Lutheran heritage and are shaped by the diverse contexts in which we experience and witness to God’s liberating grace.

I am honoured and delighted to be invited to speak to you at this distinguished and important event of the Caritas family and share some reflections with you regarding our collaboration and joint commitment and service to the marginalised people in this world. I also bring you special greetings from World Service, which is the counterpart of Caritas Internationalis in the LWF and whose mission to work with those most in need is identical.

2017 was an important year in the life of the Lutheran communion, as it marked 500 years since the beginning of the Reformation. We are grateful how the Catholic Church supported us to do this in an ecumenical spirit. In the preceding years Catholics and Lutherans jointly developed a landmark ecumenical document: *From Conflict to Communion*. It laid the foundation for such an ecumenical approach. Besides being the first joint document describing the historical events and theological understanding of the reformation, it presents five ecumenical imperatives for our churches as we move into the future. The document invites Catholics and Lutherans to think from the perspective of the unity of the body of Christ, and to seek to express it.

The fifth imperative is acutely relevant to this assembly and I suspect also the reason why I have been invited to address you and reads as follows:

*Ecumenical engagement for the unity of the church does not serve only the church but also the world so that the world may believe. The missionary task of ecumenism will become greater the more pluralistic our societies become with respect to religion…*

*The fifth imperative: Catholics and Lutherans should witness together to the mercy of God in proclamation and service to the world.*

In the spring of 2016, the General Secretary of Caritas Internationalis and myself found ourselves in numerous meetings to prepare for the festivities of the Commemoration and joint worship service which was to be held in Lund, Sweden, led by Pope Francis and the leadership of the LWF, and followed by a large public event in Malmö. The idea behind the event was this: as we move from conflict to communion, so we need to express a move towards joint service in the world.

At the centre of the event, which brought together over 10000 people in a large stadium, was the work of Caritas Internationalis and LWF World Service – work of service to the world, the poor, the marginalised, refugees, migrants, the abused, girls, boys, women and men. During the event, Michel and I signed a Letter of Intent, committing to find ways to work together globally and locally, intentionally, and understanding how important it is to witness through diakonia.

This collaboration is vital: it represents a visible consequence of our joint ecumenical theological endeavour. It shows that faith and life are inseparable. It witnesses to our call to stand together for the sake of the neighbour – a call which we root in faith. God, who enters creation and becomes part of it in and through Jesus Christ, calls humankind to solidarity with the whole of creation.

The Secretary General of the LWF, Martin Junge, frequently refers to a story form the New Testament, which illuminates this understanding. It is the story of Jesus’ transfiguration on the mountain, which deeply illustrates the connection between justification and justice: the disciples meet the *transfigured* face of our Lord on the mountain, and yet, they are not asked to remain there. They are instead called to go down to the plains to meet the *disfigured* faces of the wounded and broken in Matthew, chapter 17. Having met and seen Christ, we are drawn into God’s movement towards creation to witness to God’s liberating and transforming power in our world.

Our Letter of Intent embodies and confirms both this calling and our response. It represents a joint commitment that has served as important anchor for our collaboration. It calls us to look forward to the future, to find the opportunities for collaboration, to join forces and work together as we look to the challenges of the years ahead.

And surely there are many challenges we share. The world we are living in and the changes taking place which affect those of us working in humanitarian assistance, development aid and advocacy are not all positive and many of them very frightening. Sometimes, listening to the media, it seems that those defending the rights of refugees, International Humanitarian Law, Human Rights and the need for nations to work together to combat massive threats to our planet, the environment, our common humanity are increasingly ridiculed, questioned and marginalised. What used to be seen as the shared basis for our international order, the unquestioned value and worth of each human being, created and born equal, suddenly seems at risk again. Collaboration would seem to be all the more important in our world today, and there are many in which joint action, collaboration and learning from each other will really make a difference.

During the last Caritas Assembly I had the pleasure of joining you all for dinner as I did last night as well, and joined a table which was taken by 8 African cardinals and bishops. It was my first Caritas assembly, and I was wondering how our evening would go and what we would find to discuss among these leaders who I didn’t know. So when it turned out that no less than three of them had actually lived in refugee camps run by LWF for many years, some for over a decade, and that everyone around the table had had previous contact or collaborated with LWF in their home countries, I knew somehow that I was among friends, brothers and colleagues.

Dear friends, we *know* each other in the humanitarian field. This is just another way to get to know each other better as Christians and as churches, while living into the unity that God has given us already in Christ. Mutual service, rubbing our elbows together as we put our hands to work, is at the same time a deep ecumenical engagement which fosters mutual understanding and trust. It helps us to recognize the call into God’s mission we share.

But let me now move to some challenges facing us. The first challenge I want to mention today is the continuing rise in numbers of refugees and internally displaced populations. The capacity of the humanitarian response mechanisms to deal with these challenges is stretched to the extreme, and new requirements being put on actors relating to compliance are pushing organisations and actors to comply with increasing, often unrealistic demands. Access to many affected populations is becoming more difficult, humanitarian workers are becoming targets of military action and violations of International Humanitarian Law are becoming more commonplace. Humanitarian action has been the traditional area of collaboration between our organisations, and in recent years we have been engaged in developing consortia applications with some Caritas members, but there is much room for improvement and concerted effort to seek each other out. Capacity building of church members and local structures is a specific area at the grassroots level which could be an opportunity for us to find sustainable mechanisms and high impact as we continue to work in difficult areas – our combined front line response is like no other network existing globally.

Secondly, our joint engagement in the SDG framework of leaving no-one behind. The erosion of the basis of understanding that everyone is equal is also challenging us as we work to alleviate poverty globally. Overall, disregard for human rights will result in people being left behind, if not being crushed altogether. As we work to achieve the SDGs, we make sure to link them to the human rights framework which still forms the basis of international law and the multilateral instruments which have been constructed to protect and safeguard all human beings.

A specific challenge to us, which affects half of the world population, is the fact that in so many places advancements in the realisation of women’s human rights are being eroded, and past achievements seem to be slipping back instead of moving forward. Misogynist, fearful voices are becoming louder, wanting to halt women and girls from participation and action for a more equal, fair world. This is a particular challenge to us as churches too. In the Lutheran World Federation, the introduction of quota systems already in the 1980s, as well as consistent, communion wide commitment to uphold the equal participation and contributions of women and girls to our common work have given us encouraging results. Everyone has gained, because the situation of both men and women has improved.

This has specific relevance too in view of developments during the past year in which humanitarian organisations and the inappropriate conduct of their staff members in the field have been highlighted. Issues around safeguarding and protecting both the populations we are working to serve, but also our own staff, from harassment, exploitation and abuse are rightly gaining more attention. For quite some time, LWF has worked with a complaints handling mechanism which reaches the populations of concern, and is known to all staff worldwide. Recently we have engaged in discussions with Caritas on how to share experiences, learn from each other and continue to improve our systems, resources and capacities in dealing decisively and unreservedly with this difficult and sensitive area.

And finally, I would like to raise the specific challenge of finding the practical ways of collaborating between our organisations, on the ground, where Catholics and Lutherans live in communities side by side or work in the same regions as humanitarians and development professionals.

I would like to give an example from Nepal, where my colleague visited a community together with Caritas Nepal and the World Service office in the country. This rural community was supported by both our organisations, but with little contact to each other before the signing of the Letter of Intent in Malmö. After that, however, our local leaders came together and started to discuss joint planning, monitoring, community discussions, training. They started with almost no budget, but similar programming in the same communities. They got to know each other, shared meals together, discussed joys, successes, challenges and failures together. And during that visit my colleague saw something very special: the water system in the community had been built – LWF dug the well and Caritas built the water tank. I will not go to interpret this division of labour and what it might mean theologically – the important issue here is how we have come together for the sake of the people we serve.

We found ways to look into the future together and found the disfigured face of Christ together. This is what we need to look for, together. Our sometimes small resources put together can result in the miracle of feeding the thousands.

I would like to end my remarks, dear brothers and sisters, by raising a few questions for our joint reflection. They are issues I have struggled with personally but which would seem are important for us all as we move forward, and continue to meet the disfigured Christ and answer his calling to us as Christians living in the world today:

* How can we find ways to expand our collaboration together as Catholics and Lutherans as we have committed ourselves to do? And specifically Caritas and World Service? Where are the links? How can our church structures help us in this and facilitate constructive engagement? What is the role of us all as leaders in our own right in enabling this?
* What are the areas we can learn from each other most?
* What are the practical fields where collaboration should be easy?
* How can we promote the Human Rights framework through everything we do as organisations and collectively when we work together?

Sisters and brothers, Paul wrote to Philemon in Chapter 4: *I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share, for the sake of Christ.*

What an appropriate word for us all. Thank you Caritas Internationalis, thank you Cardinal Tagle, General Secretary Michel Roy, friends, colleagues, for what you do, and who you are. God’s blessings on your assembly and your work in the world, for the Glory of God, for Hope and a Future. Thank you.