

2020 WEEK OF PRAYER FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

Caritas Internationalis's Ecumenical and Interreligious Partnership Advisor, Davide Bernocchi, tells us about Caritas' work with other Christian denominations.

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is an ecumenical initiative celebrated all over the world by the major Christian denominations. What is its significance for Caritas?

In his speech at the World Council of Churches in Geneva, in June 2018, Pope Francis reflected on ecumenism by focusing on three key words: walking, praying and working together. The ecumenical dialogue has several dimensions. Pope Francis teaches that, while Christians are still divided on many theological and ecclesiological issues, they are somehow already united in the "ecumenism of blood", wherever Christians are persecuted because of their faith, and in the "ecumenism of charity", when they work together – one of the key words – and bear witness to their faith in a spirit of *diakonia*. "The credibility of the Gospel," said Pope Francis, "is put to the test by the way Christians respond to the cry of all those, in every part of the world, who suffer unjustly from the baleful spread of an exclusion that, by generating poverty, foments conflicts." This demonstrates the importance of the cooperation with networks and organisations belonging to other Christian denominations which is an integral part of the Caritas' mission and strategy. As a matter of fact, for decades, Caritas has been striving to put in practice this "ecumenism of charity" with other Christian institutions, both at global and local level. The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity can therefore be a moment for us to pause and thank God, together with our Christian brothers and sisters, for the feeling of unity we experience when we join hands, while asking God to grant us again the perfect unity of the first Christian community, described by the Acts of the Apostles.

What does the ongoing cooperation between Caritas and other Christian organisations consist of? Who are its main ecumenical partners?

In May 2019, Caritas Internationalis held its 21st General Assembly, gathering together its 168 member organisations from all over the world. Among them, we had the joy of welcoming the representatives of the Lutheran World Federation, the World Council of Churches, ACT Alliance, the Anglican Alliance, the International Orthodox Christian Charities, in addition to organisations belonging to other religions. Maria Immonen, the Director of the World Services department of the Lutheran World Federation was a keynote speaker. This already provides a list of Caritas' main partners at the global level. Amongst them, the Lutheran World Federation is of particular importance, since a global declaration of intent was signed between Caritas Internationalis and them at the end of 2016, in the framework of Pope Francis' participation in the commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation that took place in Sweden. With these and many other Christian institutions Caritas works to uphold human dignity and promote integral human development – at global and local level - through advocacy, humanitarian responses, development initiatives, etc. Generally speaking, in line with the principles indicated by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Caritas does not cooperate with Christian organisations that use *diakonia* as a means to proselytise. Both Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis have clearly stated the difference between bearing Christian witness and proselytising. By helping our brothers and sisters in need, we want to witness to the love of God. Using this help as a way to "buy" new converts would be contrary to the Gospel. To give some concrete example of what Caritas does with ecumenical partners, I wish to refer to the ACT Alliance – Caritas Internationalis' joint program for Darfur, which has been running since 2004, helping hundreds of thousands of people who live in one of the most difficult environments on earth. Coming to the Lutheran World Federation, joint initiatives have been carried out

in countries as different as Colombia, Nepal and Syria, where they are currently helping the local Caritas cope with the many needs of crisis-affected people in Aleppo. As for advocacy, Caritas and most of the partners mentioned above have been very active in joint initiatives to advance the UN Global Compacts on refugees and migrants. To this, one should add the countless ecumenical initiatives in favour of the needy that see the participation of diocesan and parish Caritas throughout the world.

What is the difference between this “ecumenism of charity” and the cooperation that Caritas has with other faith-based or secular organisations and institutions?

As part of the Catholic Church, in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, Caritas seeks dialogue and cooperation with other Christians, believers of other faith as well as nonbelievers. Vatican II’s decree on ecumenism *Unitatis Redintegratio* states: “In these days when cooperation in social matters is so widespread, all men without exception are called to work together, with much greater reason all those who believe in God, but most of all, all Christians in that they bear the name of Christ. Cooperation among Christians vividly expresses the relationship which in fact already unites them, and it sets in clearer relief the features of Christ the Servant. (...) All believers in Christ can, through this cooperation, be led to acquire a better knowledge and appreciation of one another, and so pave the way to Christian unity.” This means that, when we cooperate with other Christians to express Christ’s charity towards the poor and the most vulnerable, we are also carrying out a service to the broader ecumenical dialogue and the aim for which Jesus himself prayed “so that they may all be one” (John 17:21).

What are the main challenges taken on by Caritas and its ecumenical partners in today’s world?

Among the many competing priorities, I think Caritas and other ecumenical partners agree that the most relevant and urgent issues are the care for our Common Home (that some other Churches prefer to tackle as “climate justice”) and the growing inequalities, conflicts and global migration related to ecological issues. Regarding the care for creation and climate change, the pronouncements of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I and Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato Si’* are certainly regarded as references by most. As a Catholic network, therefore, Caritas has an important role to play. Caritas Internationalis’ current strategic framework, which aims to “promote integral human development by addressing issues of climate and social justice, peace and reconciliation in light of *Laudato Si’*”, is therefore extremely timely and relevant.

This year’s theme for the Week of Prayer is “They showed us unusual kindness” (Acts 28:2). How does this message that resonate with Caritas?

“They showed us unusual kindness” refers to the treatment that St. Paul and his companions received from the people of Malta when a dangerous storm forced them to stop on their island, on their way from Caesarea to Rome. How can we not think of the thousands of people who risk their lives to try to cross the Mediterranean from south to north? In today’s world, while migrants and refugees are increasingly victimised by xenophobia, it is reassuring to see the substantial unity among Christian Churches and institutions – including Caritas - in showing kindness and humanity to these people. While addressing the World Council of Churches, Pope Francis said, “We cannot look the other way. It is problematic when Christians appear indifferent towards those in need. Even more troubling is the conviction on the part of some, who consider their own blessings clear signs of God’s predilection rather than a summons to responsible service of the human family”. Against the culture of indifference and the walls of inequalities, every day the people of Caritas join hands with their Christian brothers and sisters to defend humanity, with love and kindness.

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