



Caritas Internationalis President's Report 2015–2019

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President's Report 2015–2019

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The service demanded of the President of Caritas Internationalis at first appeared to me as a burden too heavy for my shoulders to carry. I soon realised, however, that by taking it on willingly, this is not a load I bear, instead it lifts me up and transports me to the heights and depths of God's love for humanity.

This report is a testimony to what I have seen, heard and touched regarding the service of charity rendered by the Caritas family, providing hope for a more just and peaceful world. As we look back at the past four years, we are grateful for the marvellous things God has accomplished through Caritas, despite our faults and limitations.

In this welcome to you all, I want to contemplate what it means in practice for our work as Caritas to serve as part of one human family, sharing one common home, witnessing to love.

One human family: we are all responsible for all

My engagement with Caritas Internationalis has affirmed the constant calling of Jesus to us: "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you should love one another" (*Jn 13:34*). Loving as Jesus loves us entails exercising responsibility for each other.

This truth is captured in the deceptively simple words of St John Paul II: "We are all really responsible for all" (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, #38).

This is the basis of our Caritas mission – our belief that all are created equal in the sight of God, and that all human destiny is ultimately shared, including by Jesus himself, who fully shared in our human condition.

In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis reminds us that "the world is a gift which we have freely received and must share with others" (#159), since we are responsible for their care and custody. There simply is no other way to face our common problems in

our common home. It is our human dignity, our very survival, that is at stake.

This recognition of our shared human destiny can take us to some surprising and wonderful places. When I was in Beirut visiting refugees, schoolchildren and detainees, I noticed how exhausted the Caritas workers and volunteers were. There are 1.5 million refugees in Lebanon, 70 per cent of them below the poverty line. The challenges facing Caritas were so immense, that every day was bleak. So I asked them as a counterbalance, "What are your stories of hope?"

One woman spoke up. Her name is Jeanne d'Arc and she is a specialist in the pastoral care of detained migrants. She explained how she was invited to Caritas Syria to train them in her valuable skills – the kind of shared learning that enriches Caritas. On her way to the seminar one morning she took a taxi. She asked the driver how much the fare was.

"No charge," he said. She became alarmed. "I have money!" she exclaimed. "How much is the fare?" He replied, "How can I take money from Caritas?"

"How did you know I was from Caritas?" asked Jeanne, astonished. The taxi driver looked at her.

"Three years ago, I was in prison in Beirut," he said. "I was sick, I asked for medicine. No-one came. Then you passed by. You heard me, you brought me medicine. That night I was able to sleep. I was not able to thank you then, so please, let me thank you now."

Here is God at work in our lives. In a dark, sealed prison in Beirut, love entered. This Caritas worker reached through the barrier that divided her from an unknown refugee and at that moment, shared in his destiny. Three years later, in another country, their paths cross once more, and she finds that her act of mercy has lived in his heart all that time.

Caritas as one family: partnership and sharing of gifts

This acceptance that we are one human family, that we are all responsible for each other, brings powerful implications, especially for the Caritas confederation. Are we ready?

When Caritas arranged for Pope Francis to meet a group of Rohingya in Dhaka, Bangladesh his consciousness of their suffering overcame him. He put his official text aside, gathered the refugees around him and wept as he asked their forgiveness for the harm done to them and the indifference of the world.

You might say that their plight was not his fault. Yet our faith teaches us that no person or country is exempt from the collective duty to care for our common home and its inhabitants. With the Jubilee of Mercy, Pope Francis reminded us of the imperative for each of us to become agents of God's loving care. As he wept before the Rohingya the following year, he took on that responsibility. He challenged the crowd, and all of us with them, as he said: "Let us not close our hearts or look the other way." (*Dhaka, 2 Dec 2017*)

When I visited the Rohingya camps in Bangladesh in December 2018 to mark the first anniversary of Pope Francis' pastoral visit to Bangladesh, I saw Caritas take up his challenge. I witnessed the special magic that happens when the global confederation comes together, when common responsibility is exercised in partnership, mutual respect and reciprocity.

The work being achieved by Caritas Bangladesh, serving over half a million people since the crisis began, is incredibly impressive. I confess that on the ride to the huge camp in Kutupalong, I wondered how Caritas Bangladesh, small as it was, could respond to the massive challenges. The answer emerged before my eyes: Caritas Bangladesh does not have to do it alone. It belongs to a big Caritas family, the confederation where partnership and sharing of diverse gifts for the common good are family tradition.

I visited the home of a couple called Jahid and Rehena. Their house was decent and dignified, thanks to the help of member organisations and

other international groups. But what struck me as a moment of grace was after the visit, when a Caritas worker whispered to me how pleasantly surprised they were to see a new Rehena come out of her shell to welcome me and talk animatedly. This was not only a house that had been constructed by partnership but by a person, a human spirit.

We climbed hills within the camp to reach the child-friendly spaces set up with the help of our member organisations. I was told that many children refused to smile or talk the first months after arriving. Now these children scarred by conflict and displacement sing, dance, read, draw, write, smile and laugh heartily. I could not help but imagine St. Paul talking to us the way he did to the Corinthians about the Body of Christ animated by the one Holy Spirit, where the many parts of the body "have the same concern for one another. If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honoured, all the parts share its joy" (*1 Cor 12:26*).

Being part of a faith-based organisation has a unique advantage compared to other humanitarian

Caritas as one family: partnership and sharing of gifts

actors. Faith enables us to operate as the one Universal Church, present within and growing out of local Churches. This spiritual dynamic gives local Caritas organisations tremendous capacities within the wider confederation. They are experts in local context and culture, with their roots in the communities they serve.

Many of the staff and volunteers of Caritas Bangladesh are Muslim, giving them extra insight towards the Rohingya in their care. They can then draw on the resources of the global confederation, with all kinds of specific skills and funding. So, Caritas Bangladesh may be a small team, but

with all of you behind them, they become mighty. Meanwhile they have many gifts to offer to the other members of Caritas Internationalis. We can all benefit from each other's wisdom.

For me, this collaboration not only makes our confederation more effective, it also makes it a source of nourishment and growth for ourselves and those we serve. No member possesses all gifts. The Holy Spirit distributes gifts to each member for the good of the whole body. But these gifts become vehicles of the common good rather than personal gain only if we aspire for the excellent way, which is love (*1 Cor 12:31*).

Sharing the journey with the “other”

In this spirit of partnership and exchange of gifts, a year ago I joined with my fellow faith representatives from the Buddhist, Jewish, Muslim and Christian traditions to call on global leaders at the United Nations in New York to improve how the world treats migrants and refugees.

My initial anxiety turned to thanksgiving and gratitude because of the remarkable convergence of the teachings of various religious traditions on the dignity of migrants, refugees and strangers: all agree that they deserve humane treatment.

As Moses says, “You must befriend the stranger, for you were once aliens yourselves in the land of Egypt” (*Deut 10:19*). Jesus renews his promise of eternal reward to those who welcome strangers for, “Whatever you did for one of these least brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (*Mt 25:40*).

At the United Nations, we explained that our networks are on the front line of serving these people throughout their journeys, giving us the moral authority to demand safe and legal pathways for them to seek a better life.

When I listen to Rohingya families, or to Filipino migrants detained in a Lebanese jail, I hear their incalculable pain, and I know that the world must find a more merciful response. Pope Francis led the way by declaring the Jubilee Year of Mercy, with its focus on refugees.

We are thankful then, that in December 2018 the United Nations adopted the Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, which Caritas helped to draft. It is a significant step towards taking up our shared responsibilities as an international community and we pray that it may bring positive change.

Real change, however, starts in people’s hearts. To encourage people to reach out to others we launched our Share the Journey pilgrimage beside refugees and migrants.

When we began the Global Pilgrimage Walk in October 2018, we wanted to show those forced from their homes by conflict or destitution that there are sisters and brothers who care for them and will walk beside them.

I confess I did not complete a great share of the one million kilometre goal – just a 2km stroll through the beautiful streets of Rome – but something much bigger than me had begun. Pilgrimage walks have been completed by many of your teams in the Caritas family, in a worldwide display of solidarity. Between us we have so far walked around 400,000 km.

With each one of those kilometres, we have shown that the first step of the journey is to see the other person in their full God-given dignity. If we look away or give in to fear, we lose our perspective and the core of what it is to be human. Instead, as Pope Francis tells us, “let us cultivate an openness of heart that views others as an avenue, not a barrier” (*Dhaka, 1 Dec 2017*).

By walking together with migrants and refugees and talking with each other, we recognise a sister, a brother, a neighbour – and ourselves. Suddenly we have lost our fear, and we have become one human family. We share the same dreams for our families and children, the same pain, the same hopes, the same earth, the same history. We share the journey.

Hope for humanity: the power of witness of Caritas volunteers

In this whole migrant story, marked by so much suffering, we marvel at the depths of love and of caring that Caritas volunteers and host communities have shown as they share the arduous journey of those they assist.

My first encounter with refugees as Caritas president was in October 2015 at the height of the refugee crisis in Europe. I visited Caritas Hellas in Idomeni, a tiny Greek village that had swollen into a vast refugee transit point.

I remember standing by the little Caritas awning, greeting the arrivals. It seemed the line of waiting people would never end. It struck me that there was only one paid staff person helping, all the rest were volunteers. The work was unceasing. They took turns to pack food, sort clothes and perhaps most important of all, spend time with the refugees, listening to their stories, keeping their hope alive.

Some stories remain with you for a long time. An unaccompanied minor caught my eye in that camp.

He stood out in the long procession because he did not walk with a family. I asked him where he was from. "Syria", he said. I asked where his parents were. He repeated: "Syria". When I asked him why he travelled alone, he replied: "Parents said, 'Go! Go!'"

My heart was pierced, imagining that painful good-bye. Occasionally his story comes back to my mind. I wonder where he is now, if he is safe or if he will ever meet his parents again. Then I utter a prayer for them all.

Caritas is Caritas because of people who give of themselves to help their sisters and brothers. In Nepal after the 2015 earthquake, I saw how communities are restoring not only physical structures, but their very hopes and dreams: many volunteers have come forward for the training programme on how to help others overcome the psychological trauma caused by loss and grief. The survivors created new poems and songs about the earthquake, in which they sang the praises of Caritas volunteers who came to their rescue.

In another example, at World Youth Day in January 2019, two young people from Panama and Nicaragua came forward at the Caritas event to share their own difficult experience of migration with scores of young Caritas volunteers. Walls of fear were broken down, as those present realised that these were people like themselves, sisters and brothers.

"We put in our drop of water to form an ocean," said Jorge, an impoverished farmer from Panama. "Little by little we will change the world." I saw in these young people the concept of one human family become a reality before my eyes.

This generosity of spirit that I encounter in Caritas volunteers and staff is a mirror of God's love for his people. In the words of Pope Francis on the most recent World Day of the Poor: "God's answer to the poor is always a saving act that heals wounds of body and soul, restores justice and helps to live life anew in dignity" (*Message on World Day of the Poor, 2018*).

Hope for humanity: the power of witness of Caritas volunteers

It requires from us as humanitarian workers what he calls a “loving attentiveness” (*Evangelii Gaudium* #199) – not just practical or technical assistance, no matter how important that is, but a careful discernment of the person’s best interests.

At a time when people are losing trust in other persons and institutions, Caritas can help people believe again in the human capacity to be good, to do good, to love and to care. Through the selfless service of Caritas workers and volunteers, many suffering people can begin to trust and hope again. The poor that we serve summon us to keep in our minds and hearts “whatever is true, honourable, just, pure, lovely, gracious and excellent” (*Php* 4:8).

Touching the wounds of Christ in the wounds of humanity: right relationships

This loving attentiveness is especially asked of us as people of faith towards wounded people. Confronted by the crisis of human trafficking, Pope Francis and other faith leaders have set a target of 2020 for the eradication of this scourge. We cannot waste time.

Since we met in Abuja, Nigeria in 2016 as faith organisations from 43 countries, both Christian and Muslim, we have committed to many initiatives to combat modern slavery. At that conference, with the special grace afforded by the Jubilee Year of Mercy, we pledged to take a lead in preventing this terrible crime against humanity.

We have unique access through our social pastoral care to educate families about the risks they face. As community leaders we are using our influence to press governments to legislate in favour of victims and bring criminal proceedings against perpetrators.

The restoration of people's fundamental human dignity, wherever it is violated, is essential for the common good and for our right relationships with society, with God and with the earth. But it requires the courage to see and touch the wounds of humanity. They are the wounds of the crucified and risen Lord.

Caritas workers are like the disciples to whom the risen Jesus showed his wounds (*Jn 20:19-29*). The wounds remind us of Jesus' solidarity with the poor and suffering of this world. From those wounds came Jesus' offer of peace, healing and reconciliation. Beholding the wounds of Jesus in the wounds of others, we say with Thomas, "My Lord and my God!"

The moral law of protecting human dignity and not inflicting wounds on others is just as pertinent within our own organisations and therefore we welcome the new Caritas safeguarding policies,

ensuring the protection of the vulnerable people we serve and respecting the rights of those with whom we work.

This is the time for Caritas to recognise fully the vital contribution of women in our organisation and in the Church, something which we may often have taken for granted. We simply cannot tackle poverty and care for creation effectively without involving women and men equally in the endeavour.

We note that there are too few women in leadership positions within Caritas on the national, regional or international level, and this is a wound that we must look at and touch. Equal access to opportunities, resources and rewards is an essential pre-requisite if we are to achieve the principal mission of Caritas: integral human development. Let us not forget that Mary of Magdala was the one sent by the risen Jesus to proclaim his resurrection to the other disciples (*Jn 20:11-18*).

The canonisations: authentic human development and integrity

We have learned so much about the nature of authentic human development from two great patrons of Caritas who were canonised in 2018. It was an occasion of grace and joy for us and for the world.

The examples of St Pope Paul VI and St Oscar Romero remind us that a life of authentic humanity and integrity makes all work of charity credible. Here, sanctity and integrity meet. Thus, the Caritas management standards we have set ourselves are a help to holiness and effective mission.

The pope and the archbishop met only once in person, but Caritas operates in the space where they met spiritually and intellectually. We share their vision of a Church transformed by its encounters with the poor, that requires an internal conversion

or “revolution” of the heart and complete commitment even when it entails suffering.

St Paul VI experienced “bloodless martyrdom”, enduring ridicule and abandonment as he promoted the renewal of the Church in turbulent times. But internal conversion can also bring the prospect of a violent death, as we see in the martyrdom of St Oscar Romero. Here indeed was a person who understood that we are all responsible for all, who took upon himself the sufferings of the Salvadoran people as his own.

I felt deeply moved to preside and preach at a thanksgiving Mass for these two saints of Caritas the day before the canonisation. I trembled with joy to have Cardinal Gregorio Rosa Chávez, a close friend of Monsignor Romero, concelebrate

with me along with Cardinal Óscar Rodríguez Maradiaga, my predecessor as president of Caritas Internationalis. Also present were many bishops and priests, with a vibrant representation from Caritas member organisations.

At the Mass, I understood more deeply that Caritas is not just work and activity. It is love embodied by human beings like Pope Paul VI, Oscar Romero, and the countless women and men of Caritas, who make Jesus’ words and actions in the Eucharist their life mission: “This is my body, given for you. This is my blood, given for you.”

I believe that in them, Jesus’ words are fulfilled: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” (*Jn 15:13*). Sanctity in total self-giving love is the true face of Caritas.

Caritas and mercy: the face of the Church

I pray that that you who make up the lifeblood of Caritas will never forget to appreciate the wonder that God accomplishes through you in every act of mercy. It may well seem, as Pope Francis has said, “like a drop of water in the desert of poverty, yet it can serve as a sign of sharing with those in need and can enable them to sense the active presence of a brother or a sister” (*World Day of the Poor, 2018*).

What I saw when I walked amongst the Rohingya in Bangladesh, refugees in Greece, Lebanon and Jordan, the earthquake survivors in Nepal, was immense human suffering. But I also witnessed the

hope that Caritas can inflame in people whom the world has cast aside.

For as long as they need solidarity, love and compassion, Caritas will be there, respecting their human dignity, journeying with them as one human family, in one common home. Caritas turns to them with a face of authenticity, integrity and sanctity.

“Faith, hope and love remain, but the greatest of these is love” (*1 Cor 13:13*). Why is love the greatest? Because “God is love” (*1 Jn 4:8*). My dear sisters and brothers, let us never grow tired of loving.



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