

# Caritas Internationalis General Assembly

22nd to 27th May 2011, Domus Mariae Palazzo Carpegna, Rome



## *Caritas Internationalis* – 19th General Assembly

Homily of Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Secretary of State  
Sunday, 22 May 2011

*“Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvellous deeds; he has revealed to the nations his saving power, alleluia” (Ps 97:1-2; Entrance antiphon for the Fifth Sunday of Easter).*

Dear Brothers and Sisters!

The life of the Church, and the life of each Christian united to Christ in the Church, are always a “new song”: they constantly proclaim, in the face of human weakness and failings, the wonders and marvellous deeds of the Lord. Our life is a itself wonder, for it is a share in the life of Jesus Christ and his revelation to the world. *Caritas Internationalis*, in the heart of the universal Church, and each diocesan and local *Caritas* are a sign of that “new song” which makes the Lord’s saving power known to all men and women.

We are gathered for your 19<sup>th</sup> General Assembly and for the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of *Caritas*. As part of that great praise of God and thanksgiving in Christ which is the heart of every Eucharistic celebration, today gives us a special opportunity to thank the Lord for the organized charitable activity of the Church (cf. Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, 21-23) and, more concretely, for the history, life and activity of *Caritas Internationalis*. Let us raise our voices to God in thanksgiving for the countless acts of charity carried out by this agency since its foundation, and particularly for those carried out in the last four years.

In the name of the Holy Father I thank all of you, the officers of *Caritas Internationalis* and the representatives of the national *Caritas* agencies and its sister institutions, and I extend this expression of gratitude to all the local *Caritas* agencies at the diocesan and parish levels for your promotion and implementation of Christian charity. This unified effort is a response to the words of our Lord Jesus, who says in today’s Gospel: “I tell you most solemnly, whoever believes in me will perform the same works as I do myself; he will perform even greater works because I am going to the Father” (*Jn* 14:1-2). Particular gratitude is due for the work carried out in the aftermath of the recent natural disasters in Haiti and Japan, as well as for the ready assistance provided in emergencies resulting from conflicts like those in Côte d’Ivoire and in other situations of war, and from situations of extreme poverty. Amid all these painful realities, this worthy Church institution is called to demonstrate, practically and effectively, that the world is one family, the family of the children of God: “*One human family, zero poverty*”, to echo the theme of the present Assembly.

### **1. Organized Charitable Assistance – the charity of the whole Church as the Body of Christ and the People of God**

The passage from the Acts of the Apostles which we heard in first reading – the appointment of the first deacons in the community of Jerusalem – is very appropriate for this meeting. With the

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establishment of that first group of seven, “diaconia”, as organized community service, became part of the Church’s basic structure (cf. *Deus Caritas Est*, 21-23). Subsequently, as the Holy Father says in his Encyclical on Christian love: “the exercise of charity became established as one of her essential activities, along with the administration of the sacraments and the proclamation of the Word: love for widows and orphans, prisoners, and the sick and needy of every kind is as essential to her as the ministry of the sacraments and the preaching of the Gospel. The Church cannot neglect the service of charity any more than she can neglect the sacraments and the Word” (No. 22).

*Caritas internationalis*, then, is a part of this fundamental dimension of the Church’s structured charitable activity (cf. *ibid.*, 23). Your activity is thus a public sign of the Church as Christ’s Body and the People of God. For “love of neighbor, grounded in the love of God, is first and foremost a responsibility for each individual member of the faithful, ... it is also a responsibility for the entire ecclesial community at every level: from the local community to the particular Church and to the Church universal in her entirety”. Your contribution is part of this ordered ecclesial *diaconia*. “As a community”, in fact, “the Church must practice love” and “love also needs to be organized if it is to be an ordered service to the community” (*ibid.*, 20). This is particularly true for *Caritas*, inasmuch as it must be understood as a means by which the Bishop carries out his pastoral work of providing charitable assistance.

## 2. What is fundamental: the Church as the Body of Christ

In the second reading we heard the words of the Apostle Peter: “the Lord is the living stone, rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him; set yourselves close to him so that you too, the holy priesthood that offers the spiritual sacrifices which Jesus Christ has made acceptable to God, may be living stones making a spiritual house” (*1 Pet* 2:4-9). The Church is the Body of Christ. She is the living presence of Christ along the pathways of history. Consequently, the Christian, called to live his or her own life fully in union with Christ – “in” him, as St. Paul loves to say – cannot do so apart from life in the Church. Just as Christ is the sacrament of the Father, the Church is the sacrament of Christ. To live in the Church, then, means to her mission our own, to cooperate in her saving work: the proclamation of the word of God (*kerygma-martyria*), the celebration of the sacraments (*leiturgia*) and the service of charity (*diakonia*). These three tasks presuppose and are inseparable from one another (cf. *Deus Caritas Est*, 25).

The full mission of *Caritas Internationalis* is thus carried out in the Church. This agency, along with all the national diocesan and parish *Caritas* offices, offers the faithful a privileged opportunity to participate in the Church’s mission and to draw near to Jesus Christ. “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” (*ibid.*). This ecclesial charity has a twofold expression: one within the community, another reaching out to all. First, within the Church herself, as a family, “no one ought to go without the necessities of life ... no member should suffer through being in need” (*ibid.*); at the same time, *caritas-agape* surpasses the “confines” of the ecclesial community and, following the example of the Good Samaritan, shoulders the needs of our brothers and sisters, whosoever they may be (cf. *ibid.*).



All this was clearly understood and implemented in the creation of *Caritas Internationalis* and the development of its activities during the past sixty years of its history; it was particularly shown in 2004, when it was granted public canonical juridical personality, which established the agency in qualified communion with the Church's hierarchy and gave it a particular share in her mission, a share that *Caritas Internationalis* is constantly called to reflect deeply upon, to appropriate and to express in practice. Public canonical personality is a juridical means of reflecting a theological reality: in full communion with Christ and the Church, manifested in the life of its members and in their personal adherence to Jesus Christ, *Caritas Internatonalis* will be truly capable of helping to make the world one family, since it is only in Jesus Christ that our true human identity and dignity is revealed to us (cf. Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, 22).

### **3. The Gospel of the paralytic: at the service of full human dignity**

In the episode of the paralytic at Capernaum (cf. *Mt* 9:1-7; *Mk* 2:1-12; *Lk* 5:17-26) the Gospels recount that Jesus, before healing the man, forgave him his sins, which scandalized some of the scribes present. Jesus wanted to reveal explicitly that he was sent by the Father to heal man integrally, in spirit and in body, and that the deepest human paralysis is unseen, a paralysis caused by sin, from which only God can set us free. At the same time Jesus reveals fully man to himself: he reveals the paralytic to himself by reminding him of his transcendent dignity. In manifesting himself as the Son of the merciful Father who forgives our sins, Jesus sets before us the full meaning of human life, our relationship with the Almighty. The healing of physical paralysis becomes the sign of new life in our refound dignity as sons and daughters of God.

The Church's charitable activity, like that of Christ, could never be limited to assisting people's material needs, however urgent and immediate those needs might be. A humanitarian assistance which would habitually prescind from its Christian identity, adapting a "neutral" approach seeking to please everyone, would risk, even in cases where it obtained its immediate goals, failing to offer men and women a fine service consonant with their full dignity. Thus, even without wishing to do so, they would eventually foster in those whom they assist a materialistic mentality which the latter would then bring to other relationships and to their approach to social issues. In a word: the Church must not only practice charity, but practice it *as Christ did*.

### **4. Helping to see the poor as our brothers and sisters**

*Caritas Internationalis*, in its daily encounter with human needs and forms of poverty, recognizes the urgency of defending and promoting the rights of the poor, also vis-à-vis international authorities. Within the terms of the agency's particular share in the Church's mission and its specific mandate as a canonical public person, when carried out in communion with the Church's rightful pastors, such advocacy enriches the Church. Nonetheless, there is another level of service which is prior to and more important than that which concerns public authorities. It involves appealing in a convincing and respectful way to the minds and hearts of believers and all persons of good will, enabling them to see the poor as their brothers and sisters. This is what the Servant of God Pope Paul VI had in mind he insisted that the task of *Caritas* is primarily educational. Ideologies both liberal and collectivist, while containing aspects of truth borrowed from Christianity, have led to disillusionment because they promised a paradise on earth. The fact is that paradise will never be attained in history,

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yet we must constantly commit ourselves responsibly to the service of our brothers and sisters. At the root of all forms of poverty are selfishness and indifference, which express themselves politically above all in corruption. *Caritas Internationalis* and the national and local *Caritas* agencies do immense good when they help persons and communities to lovingly acknowledge the presence of our brothers and sisters in need, which is the presence of Christ himself (cf. *Mt* 25:31-46); when they trouble consciences and help people to realize the importance of evangelical sharing, whether by personal initiatives or in cooperation with the Church's organized charitable activity. To reveal the faces of our brothers and sisters, to help Christians and all people of goodwill to care for their needs as if they were their own, and to demand the full recognition of their dignity: this is the fundamental commitment of *Caritas Internationalis*, as well as the goal of that renewed relationship with the agencies of the Holy See which I trust will be the result of the present Assembly.

## 5. The ultimate aim of the Assembly

*“Do not let your hearts be troubled ... Lord we do not know where you are going... I am the way the truth and the life” (Jn 14:1, 5, 6).*

To carry out the diaconia of charity in its fullness, to go beyond providing material assistance and defending the rights of the poor, to strive to awaken in all those whom you assist an awareness of their human dignity, and to confirm in Christians and in people of good will a practical sense of fraternity especially with regard to the poor, it is necessary to live in Jesus Christ, who is “the way, the truth and the life”, and to be enlivened by his Holy Spirit. This Assembly is not only an occasion for a fraternal encounter and the fulfilment of institutional duties. It is primarily an occasion for a more intense encounter with Christ and for a renewed personal commitment to serve our brothers and sisters in the spirit of Christ. We find Christ in his Word and in the Bread of Life, in personal prayer and in the sacraments; we also find him, and we share his life with others, in the activities of *Caritas* and the *Caritas family*, as a distinctive part of the Church. The sacraments, the Word and diaconia are all essential elements of the Church's life and that of individual Christians. Thanks to these elements we will be able to take the “place” prepared for us by Christ in the Father's house, but only if we have loved our brothers and sisters as Jesus taught us.

## 6. Good wishes and a prayer in the name of the Holy Father

This, dear friends, is my hope for you, personally and in your families, and for your service to the Church and in *Caritas*. Above all, however, I have the joy of conveying the greetings and assuring you of the spiritual closeness of our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI. He chose to devote his first Encyclical to Christian charity, and, especially in its second part, to the exercise of that charity by the Church as a community of love. He attentively follows your progress and he accompanies you with his prayers, entrusting these intentions to the maternal intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary and to the prayers of Blessed John Paul II, who erected *Caritas Internaionalis* as a public canonical person. May those prayers obtain for all present, and for all those taking part in the work of this Assembly, efficacious and enduring fruits of charity and peace.