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UDIENZA AI PARTECIPANTI ALL'ASSEMBLEA GENERALE DELLA *CARITAS INTERNATIONALIS*

Alle 12.30 di questa mattina, nella Sala Clementina del Palazzo Apostolico Vaticano, il Santo Padre Benedetto XVI ha ricevuto in Udienza i partecipanti alla 18ma Assemblea Generale della *Caritas Internationalis* e ha loro rivolto il discorso che riportiamo di seguito:

• DISCORSO DEL SANTO PADRE

Dear Friends,

It is a special joy for me to welcome the participants in the Eighteenth General Assembly of *Caritas Internationalis*. I extend particular greetings to Doctor Denis Viénot and to the President of the Pontifical Council "*Cor Unum*", Archbishop Paul Josef Cordes, thanking them for their kind words a few moments ago. I also offer prayerful best wishes to the newly elected President of the Confederation, Cardinal Rodríguez Maradiaga. You have all come together in Rome during these days for a significant moment in the life of the Confederation, so that your member organizations can reflect, in an atmosphere of fraternal communion, on the challenges facing you at the present time. Moreover, you have taken important steps shaping your immediate future by electing the major officers of *Caritas Internationalis*. I am confident that your deliberations during these days have been of great benefit for you personally, for the work of your member organizations worldwide, and for all those you serve.

First of all, let me take this opportunity to thank you for the outstanding witness that your Confederation has given to the world, ever since the founding of the first national *Caritas* in Germany over a century ago. Since that time, there has been a great proliferation of organizations bearing the name—on parish, diocesan and national levels—and these have been gathered, through the initiative of the Holy See, into the Confederation *Caritas Internationalis*, which today numbers more than 150 national organizations. It was because of the public character of your charitable activity, rooted in the love of God, that my predecessor the Servant of God John Paul II conferred public and canonical legal personality upon *Caritas Internationalis* through the Pontifical Letter *During the Last Supper* of 16 September 2004. This status seals your organization's ecclesial membership, giving it a specific mission within the Church. It means that your Confederation does not simply work on behalf of the Church, but is truly a part of the Church, intimately engaged in the exchange of gifts that takes place on so many levels of ecclesial life. As a sign of the Holy See's support for your work, *Caritas Internationalis* has been granted its wish to be accompanied and guided by the Pontifical Council *Cor Unum*.

So what is the particular mission of your Confederation? What aspect of the Church's task falls to you and to your member organizations? You are called, by means of the charitable activity that you undertake, to assist in the Church's mission to spread throughout the world the love of God that has been "poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit" (*Rom* 5:5). The very concept of *caritas* draws us into the heart of Christianity, into the heart of Christ, from which "rivers of living water" flow (cf. *Jn* 7:38). In the work of charitable organizations like yours, we see the fruits of Christ's love. I developed this theme in my Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, which I commend to you once more as a reflection on the theological significance of your action in the world. Charity has to be understood in the light of God who is *caritas*: God who loved the world so much that he gave his only Son (cf. *Jn* 3:16). In this way we come to see that love finds its greatest fulfilment in the gift of self. This is what *Caritas Internationalis* seeks to accomplish in the world. The heart of *Caritas* is the sacrificial love of Christ, and every form of individual and organized charity in the Church must always find its point of reference in him, the source of charity.

This theological vision has practical implications for the work of charitable organizations, and today I should like to single out two of them.

The first is that every act of charity should be inspired by a personal experience of faith, leading to the discovery that God is Love. The *Caritas* worker is called to bear witness to that love before the world. Christian charity exceeds our natural capacity for love: it is a theological virtue, as Saint Paul teaches us in his famous hymn to charity (cf. *1 Cor* 13). It therefore challenges the giver to situate humanitarian assistance in the context of a personal witness of faith, which then becomes a part of the gift offered to the poor. Only when charitable activity takes the form of Christ-like self-giving does it become a gesture truly worthy of the human person created in God's image and likeness. Lived charity fosters growth in holiness, after the example of the many servants of the poor whom the Church has raised to the dignity of the altars.

The second implication follows closely from the first. God's love is offered to everyone, hence the Church's charity is also universal in scope, and so it has to include a commitment to social justice. Yet changing unjust structures is not of itself sufficient to guarantee the happiness of the human person. Moreover, as I affirmed recently to the Bishops gathered in Aparecida, Brazil, the task of politics "is not the immediate competence of the Church" (*Address to the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean*, 13 May 2007). Rather, her mission is to promote the integral development of the human person. For this reason, the great challenges facing the world at the present time, such as globalization, human rights abuses, unjust social structures, cannot be confronted and overcome unless attention is focused on the deepest needs of the human person: the promotion of human dignity, well-being and, in the final analysis, eternal salvation.

I am confident that the work of *Caritas Internationalis* is inspired by the principles that I have just outlined. Throughout the world there are countless men and women whose hearts are filled with joy and gratitude for the service you render them. I wish to encourage each one of you to persevere in your special mission to spread the love of Christ, who came so that all may have life in abundance. Commending all of you to the intercession of Mary, Mother of the Church, I am pleased to impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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