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Audience with the participants in the General Assembly of Caritas Internationalis

At 12.20 today, in the Clementine Hall of the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the 21st General Assembly of Caritas Internationalis, taking place in Rome from 23 to 28 May 2019 in the Hotel Ergife, on the theme: "One human family, one common home", inspired by Pope Francis' Encyclical *Laudato si'*.

The following is the Pope's address to those present:

Address of the Holy Father

Cardinals,

venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,

dear brothers and sisters,

I am pleased to have this opportunity to meet you at your 21st General Assembly. I thank Cardinal Tagle for the words he addressed to me and I address a cordial greeting to all of you, to the great family of *Caritas* and to all those in your respective countries who are engaged in the *service of charity*.

In these days, coming from all over the world, you have experienced a significant moment in the life of the Confederation, aimed not only at fulfilling your statutory duties, but also at strengthening the bonds of reciprocal communion in joining the Successor of Peter, owing to the special link between your organization and the Apostolic See. In fact, Saint John Paul II wished to confer canonical public legal personality to *Caritas Internationalis*, calling you to share the very mission of the Church in the service of charity.

Today I would like to pause to reflect briefly with you on three key words: *charity*, *integral development* and

communion.

Given the mission that *Caritas* is called to carry out in the Church, it is important to always return to reflect together on the meaning of the word *charity* itself. Charity is not a sterile performance or a simple offering to be given in order to silence our conscience. What we must never forget is that charity has its origin and its essence in God Himself (see *Jn 4: 8*); charity is the embrace of God our Father to every man, especially to the least and the suffering, who occupy a preferential place in His heart. If we were to look at charity as a service, the Church would become a humanitarian agency and the service of charity its “logistics department”. But the Church is not this, she is something different and much greater: she is, in Christ, the sign and instrument of God’s love for humanity and for all of creation, our common home.

The second phrase is *integral development*. In the service of charity the vision of man is at stake, which cannot be reduced to a single aspect but which involves *the whole human being* as a child of God, created in His image. The poor are first and foremost persons, and their faces conceal that of Christ Himself. They are His flesh, signs of His crucified body, and we have the duty to reach out to them even in the most extreme peripheries and in the underground of history, with the delicacy and tenderness of the Mother Church. We must aim at the promotion of the whole person and of all men so that they may be the authors and protagonists of their own progress (see Saint Paul VI, Encyclical *Populorum progressio*, 34). The service of charity must, therefore, choose the logic of integral development as an antidote to the culture of waste and indifference. And speaking to you, *Caritas*, I wish to reiterate that “the worst discrimination which the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care” (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 200). You know it well: the majority of the poor “have a special openness to the faith; they need God and we must not fail to offer them His friendship, His blessing, His Word, the celebration of the Sacraments and a journey of growth and maturity in the faith” (*ibid.*). Therefore, as the example of the saints and saints of charity teaches us, “our preferential option for the poor must mainly translate into a privileged and preferential religious care” (*ibid.*).

The third word is *communion*, which is central to the Church and defines her essence. Ecclesial communion arises from the encounter with the Son of God, Jesus Christ, Who, through the proclamation of the Church, reaches men and creates communion with Himself and with the Father and the Holy Spirit (see 1 *Jn 1: 3*). It is communion in Christ and in the Church that animates, accompanies and supports the service of charity both in the communities themselves and in emergency situations throughout the world. In this way, the *diakonia* of charity becomes a visible instrument of communion in the Church (see *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 4). For this reason, as a Confederation you are accompanied by the Department for Promoting Integral Human Development, which I thank for the work it ordinarily carries out and, in particular, for supporting the ecclesial mission of *Caritas Internationalis*. I said that you are *accompanied*: you are not “under”.

Taking up these three fundamental aspects of living in *Caritas*, that is, charity, integral development and communion, I would like to urge you to live them with a style of poverty, gratuitousness and humility.

You cannot live charity without having interpersonal relationships with the poor: living with the poor and for the poor. The poor are not numbers but people. Because by living with the poor we learn to practice charity with the spirit of poverty, we learn that charity is sharing. In reality, not only is the charity that does not reach the pocket a false charity, but likewise the charity that does not involve the heart, the soul and all our being is an idea of charity that is not yet realized.

We must always be careful not to fall into the temptation of living a hypocritical or deceitful charity, a charity identified with almsgiving, or as a “tranquilliser” for our uneasy consciences. This is why we must avoid assimilating the work of charity with philanthropic efficacy, or with planning efficiency, or with exaggerated and effervescent organization.

Since charity is the most coveted of the virtues to which man can aspire to be able to imitate God, it is scandalous to see charity workers who transform it into business: they talk so much about charity but live in luxury or dissipation or organize forums on charity that pointlessly waste so much money. It is very bad to note that some charity workers turn into officials and bureaucrats.

This is why I would like to reiterate that charity is not an idea or a pious feeling, but is an experiential encounter with Christ; it is the desire to live with the heart of God Who does not ask us to have a generic love, affection, solidarity, etc. for the poor, but to meet Himself in them (see *Mt 25: 31-46*), in the style of poverty.

Dear friends, I thank you, on behalf of the whole Church, for what you do with and for so many brothers and sisters who are struggling, who are left on the sidelines, who are oppressed by the slavery of our day, and I encourage you to continue! May you all, in communion with the ecclesial communities to which you belong and of which you are an expression, continue to give your contribution with joy so that the Kingdom of God, Kingdom of justice, love and peace may grow in the world. May you always be nourished and enlightened by the Gospel, and may you be guided by the teaching and pastoral care of the Mother Church.

May the Lord bless you and Our Lady keep you. And please do not forget to pray for me. Thank you.
