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Message to participants in the General Assembly of Caritas Internationalis

This morning, the Holy Father Francis received in audience, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the participants in the General Assembly of Caritas Internationalis.

The following is the address handed by the Pope to those present during the audience:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear Brothers and Sisters of the *Caritas* family,

Following the atrocities and destruction of the Second World War, Venerable Pius XII wished to demonstrate the compassion and concern of the whole Church for the human family, and for the many situations in which armed conflict threatened the lives of men, women, children and the elderly, and blocked their integral human development. Pope Pius prophetically encouraged the establishment of a body that would support, coordinate and increase cooperation among the numerous existing charitable organizations through which the universal Church proclaimed and bore witness, with words and deeds, to God's love and Christ's preference for the poor, the least, the abandoned and discarded.

Saint John Paul II sought to highlight the close bond that, from the very beginning, united *Caritas Internationalis* to the Church's Pastors and, in particular, to the Successor of Peter, who presides over the Churches in charity.[1] *Caritas Internationalis* accomplishes this above all by drawing from the source of love in the Church, Christ's gift of himself to his own at the Last Supper.

We must never forget that, at the origin of all our charitable and social activity, is Christ himself who, "having loved his own who were in the world, loved them to the end" (*Jn* 13:1). In the Eucharist, the sacramental sign of the living, real and continuing presence of Christ who offers himself for us and who loved us first without asking anything in return, "the Lord comes to meet man, created in the image and likeness of God (cf. *Gen* 1:27), making himself his companion along the way".[2]

The Eucharist is meant for us. It is the food and drink that sustains us on our journey, that refreshes us in our weariness, that lifts us up when we fall, and that calls us freely to accept *everything* God has done for us and for our salvation.

In the presence of this great and ineffable mystery, the unconditional and superabundant gift that Christ made of himself out of love, we remain amazed and at times overwhelmed.

Like the Jews who felt their hearts pierced at Peter's words on the day of Pentecost, we too must ask ourselves: "Brothers, what should we do?" (*Acts 2:37*).

We can enter into the joyful and superabundant mystery of "giving back" with gratitude, showing our thanks to God by turning towards our brothers and sisters who suffer, who are in need of care, who require our help to regain their dignity as sons and daughters redeemed "not with perishable things..., but with the precious blood of Christ" (*1 Pet 1:18-19*).

Each of us can reciprocate God's love for us by becoming its sign and instrument for others. There is no better way to show God that we understand the meaning of the Eucharist than by giving to others what we ourselves have received (cf. *1 Cor 11:32*). When, in response to Christ's love, we make ourselves a gift for others, we proclaim the Lord's death and resurrection until he comes (v. 26). In this way, we make manifest the most authentic meaning of *Tradition*.

It is important to return to the source, God's love for us, precisely because the identity of *Caritas Internationalis* depends directly on the mission it has received. What distinguishes it from other agencies working in the social sphere is its ecclesial vocation. And what specifies its service within the Church, compared with many other ecclesial associations and institutions devoted to charity, is its task of assisting and supporting the Bishops in their exercise of pastoral *caritas*, in communion with the Apostolic See and in harmony with the Church's magisterium. In this regard, I am aware that you are working on partnership and fraternal cooperation as fundamental pillars of the Catholic identity of *Caritas*: I thank you and I urge you to continue along this path.

To encourage you to persevere in your commitment to the service of *caritas* with open hearts and renewed hope, I would ask you to reread carefully the Post-Synodal Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, and in particular its fourth chapter. Although it deals with family and married life, that chapter contains insights that may be useful in orienting the work that awaits you in the future and in giving new impetus to your mission.

Writing to the Christian community in Corinth, Saint Paul states that *caritas* is "a more excellent way" (*1 Cor 12:31*) to know God and to grasp the essentials of the Christian life. In that well-known "hymn to charity", the Apostle points out how lack of charity empties every activity of its substance, leaving only the outward form, but not the inward reality. Even the most extraordinary actions, even the most heroic acts of generosity, like giving away all one's possessions to help the starving (cf. *1 Cor 13:3*), if done without charity, are of no avail.

Without the confession of faith in God the Father, the source of all good; without the experience of friendship with Christ, who revealed the face of Trinitarian love; without the guidance of the Holy Spirit who guides human history towards the fullness of life (*Jn 10:10*), nothing remains except appearances – no longer goodness, but merely a semblance of goodness.

It would be easy then to lose sight of the purpose of the *diakonia*, the service to which we are called, namely, to share the joy of the Gospel and its message of unity and justice and peace. It would be easy to comply with worldly ways of thinking that would divert us to pragmatic activism or self-interest that wound the ecclesial body.

Charity – *caritas* – is our very life; it is what makes us "be" what we are. When we embrace God's love and when we love one another *in* him, we plumb the depths of our identity, as individuals and as Church, and the meaning of our existence. We understand not only how important our own lives are, but also how precious too are the lives of others. We perceive clearly how every life is unique and inalienable, a marvel in the eyes of God.

Love opens our eyes, expands our gaze, and allows us to recognize in the stranger who crosses our path the face of a brother or sister who has a name, a story, a drama, to which we cannot remain indifferent. In the light of God's love, the reality of the other comes forth from the shadows, emerges from insignificance, and acquires value, relevance. The needs of our neighbour challenge us, trouble us, and arouse in us a sense of responsibility. It is always in the light of love that we discover the strength and courage to respond to the evil that oppresses others, to respond to that evil personally, and to confront it by committing ourselves fully, rolling up our sleeves. God's love makes us sense the weight of the other's humanity as a yoke that is easy and a burden that is light (cf. *Mt* 11:30). It leads us to feel the wounds of others as our own and challenges us to pour the balm of fraternity on the invisible wounds that we perceive present in their heart.

Do you want to know if a Christian is living charity?

Then look closely to see if they are willing to help freely, with a smile on their face, without grumbling or getting annoyed. Charity is patient, Paul writes, and patience is the ability to endure unexpected trials, daily labours, without losing joy and trust in God. For it is the result of a slow travail of the spirit, in which we learn to master ourselves and acknowledge our limitations.

As we learn to relate to ourselves, interpersonal maturity also develops, and we come to realize that other people too "have a right to live in this world, just as they are" (*Amoris Laetitia*, 92).

Breaking free from self-referentiality, from considering what we want for ourselves as the core around which everything revolves, even to the point of bending others to our desires, requires not only restraining the tyranny of our self-centredness, but also cultivating a creative and dynamic ability to let the charisms and qualities of others come to the fore.

Living charity – *caritas* – thus entails being magnanimous and benevolent, recognizing for example that to work together constructively first requires "making space" for others. We do this when we are open to listening and dialogue, ready to consider opinions that differ from our own, not insisting on our own positions, but seeking instead a meeting point, a path of mediation.

The Christian who lives immersed in the love of God does not nurture envy, for "love has no room for discomfiture at another person's good fortune" (*Amoris Laetitia*, 95).

Love is not boastful or arrogant, for it has a sense of proportion. Love does not set us above others, but allows us to approach them with respect and kindness, gentleness and tenderness, sensitive to their frailties. "If we are to understand, forgive and serve others from the heart, our pride has to be healed and our humility must increase" (*Amoris Laetitia*, 98).

Love is not self-serving, but aims to promote the good of others and to support them in their efforts to achieve it.

Love does not take into account wrongs endured, nor does it gossip about the evil done by others; rather, with discretion and in silence it entrusts everything to God, putting aside judgement.

Love covers everything, says Paul, not to hide the truth, in which the Christian always rejoices, but to distinguish the sin from the sinner so that, while the former is condemned, the latter may be saved. Love excuses everything so that we may all find comfort in the merciful embrace of the Father and be cloaked in his loving forgiveness.

Paul concludes his "hymn" by stating that charity, as a more excellent way to reach God, is greater than faith and hope. What the Apostle says is completely true. While faith and hope are "provisional gifts", that is, linked to our lives as pilgrims and wayfarers on this earth, charity, by contrast, is "a definitive gift", a pledge and a foretaste of the final time, the Kingdom of God. Everything else will pass away, while charity will never end. The good that is done in the name of God is the good part of us that will not be lost or wiped away. God's judgement

upon history is based on the “today” of love, on his discernment of what we have done for others in his name.

As Jesus promises, the reward will be eternal life: “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (*Mt 25:34*).

From the beginning, *Caritas Internationalis* was conceived and willed as an expression of ecclesial communion, a means and manifestation of intra-ecclesial *agape*, mediating between the universal and the particular Churches, and supporting the involvement of the entire People of God in the work of charity.

Your first task is to cooperate with the universal Church in sowing seeds, proclaiming the Gospel through good works. This is not just a matter of initiating projects and strategies that prove successful and effective, but also of engaging in an ongoing process of missionary conversion. You are asked to demonstrate that the Gospel “responds to the deepest expectations of the human person: a response to each one’s dignity and fulfilment in reciprocity, communion and fruitfulness” (*Amoris Laetitia*, 201). For this reason, it is paramount to mention the intimate connection between growth in personal holiness and ecclesial missionary conversion. All those who work for *Caritas* are called to bear witness to that love before the world. Be missionary disciples! Follow in the footsteps of Christ!

Secondly, you are called to accompany local Churches in their active commitment to pastoral charity. Take care to train competent lay persons capable of bringing the Church’s message to political and social life. The challenge of a mature and conscious laity is as timely as ever, since their presence reaches all those spheres that directly touch the lives of the poor. They can express with creative freedom the Church’s maternal heart and concern for social justice, thanks to their involvement in the challenging work of changing unjust social structures and promoting the happiness of the human person.

Finally, I recommend unity. Your confederation embraces many different identities. Experience your diversity as a treasure, pluralism as a resource. Compete in showing esteem for one another, and allow conflicts to lead, not to division, but to encounter and growth.

As I commend all of you to the intercession of Mary, Mother of the Church, I ask you, please, to pray for me. Upon you and upon all those who support you in your work, I implore the Lord’s blessing.

[1] Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Chirograph *Durante l’Ultima Cena*, 16 September 2004, 2.

[2] BENEDICT XVI, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 2.
