

Some conclusions for Caritas in the turmoil of the crisis

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We are meeting in Prague during Spring time – and some of us may recall that other Prague Spring. Spring is a season of change. It reminds us of the winter that has passed and anticipates the coming of summer.

Europe – indeed, the whole world – has been hit by a financial and economic crisis and we are still not sure whether we have seen the worst of it. We are still not sure what the effects of this crisis will be on the lives of people in need. What we are beginning to understand is that some of the middle classes will become poorer.

Throughout the world, and in particular in Europe, Caritas is an expert in crisis situations. One could even say that crisis is our *raison d'être*. Caritas has an individual approach to dealing with crises. We do not use a crisis to enrich ourselves at the expense of the poor, we do not take advantage of new opportunities to exploit weaker members of society. And we do not wallow in despair. We try on all levels to build solutions – together with those affected by the crisis. Because we believe primarily in people, not systems. We were convinced – long before it became the fashion among opportunistic politicians – that power lies with people and communities, if they are able and willing to organize themselves.

Crisis can become a *kairos*, a moment of opportunity, if those in the midst of the crisis understand that they are actors and not simply victims. This happened in Prague – and it was during Spring time – and it happened 20 years ago in Berlin when the wall was opened – peacefully! So we should not allow others to fix our minds and our hearts on a financial or economic crisis – something that is nothing new for the poor of this world. They have lived with “economic crisis” for decades. We should work together so that poverty does not become a trap for even more people. We should work to ensure that justice issues again take their place on the political stage. The present crisis is the result of injustice – it is the result of wrong decisions and weak politics over the last 20 years. It is a scandal that those who should have been taking care of the public good are now trying to solve this crisis by seeking solutions from the very people who caused the problem. You can't fight a fire with a new fire – unless you are so desperate that you are willing to sacrifice huge areas of land.

The crisis we are facing has its roots in human behaviour. We are talking about a man-made crisis, not about a natural disaster. There is a serious risk that more people will be affected by poverty and deprived of the means to a decent survival in their respective countries and regions.

Politicians are calling for more consumption. Others, like Obama, are calling for less consumption. Politicians are trying to restore confidence in the system. But on the streets of some countries, people have clearly demonstrated that they do not

trust their own politicians anymore. We may witness greater political instability. And if we continue to rely on politicians and their solutions, we leave ourselves open to authoritarian solutions and new types of dictatorship. Democracy itself is at risk.

Therefore a priority for Caritas – and for politics – should be community building at the grassroots level. The concept of “subsidiarity” is sometimes explained in modern language in terms of ‘self-help initiatives’ or empowerment. We have lived through the era of individualism. Now is the time for a renaissance of communities. Organising communities is not simply a matter of political expediency. It can become a necessity, and therefore an opportunity. Caritas is an expert in organising community life in Europe and across the world. We will require new approaches to providing facilities such as soup kitchens, grocery shops and social services. Social service providers will have to take into account the new socio-economic environment. There are already new initiatives arising across our network and we should share information about these new types of social services, which are not aimed just at the poorest of the poor, but also at the new poor. We should avoid dividing the poor and the poorest. We are living in ONE SOCIETY. We should design our services in a way that ensures unity and solidarity and not segregation and hidden solutions. Only those who openly accept the problem and establish self-help groups will be able to come up with solutions.

If we are talking about social interventions, we are talking not only about technical solutions; We are talking – as the Holy Father Pope Benedict reminds us – about people and communities. We are talking about the soul of the person, about the soul of communities. This soul must be nourished as well. Some forms of religiosity are a threat to the soul because they take advantage of the suffering of people in order to dominate their lives. Our religion is a religion of liberation. With our prayers and with our actions we should contribute to a society in which people become agents of the enrichment of their own lives and dignity. We believe in people. And like Barack Obama, who has now been in office for 100 days, we should say: “yes, we can”.

Solidarity funds and ethical banks should benefit from favourable conditions. And certainly better conditions than those banks and companies who spend part of their gains on paying excessive salaries and rewarding shareholders who are only interested in harvesting big returns. We need new regulations for economic behaviour. Social services have sometimes been overregulated, whereas economic activities have been de-regulated. It’s time for a change in direction. We need new path-finders! And the path-finders of a new society are people and communities.

International institutions have a specific responsibility. They have to help society rebuild itself as a sustainable one. We – Caritas – need their help and support. There are solutions coming from the grassroots and being articulated through networks like Caritas. We call upon international organisations to allow civil society to fully participate in the decisions of today. *Without a strong and active civil society, their own institutions will also be at risk.*

We need a new architecture for the financial system. We should invest in green technologies. We should expand – and not reduce – social services. Child-centred social investment strategies should be put in place.

The conditions for a self-organising society have changed dramatically. States and Governments are back again. But multilateralism is at risk. We call upon international organizations to make all possible efforts to avoid national or regional protectionism. International assemblies and councils are good opportunities for cross-border cooperation beyond nationalistic or continental perspectives.

We must look for new solutions. A paradigm shift is necessary. The movie “*Back to the Future*” is science fiction – it doesn’t work in real life. We cannot go back and change what went wrong. We have to assume responsibility for what happened and build a new type of society and economics, where people and communities come first. Their needs must have priority – not the needs of a financial and economic system which is consuming its own customers.