

Launch event on Zero Poverty, the CE campaign for the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion

Brussels, January 27th 2010

Distinguished authorities,
Dear Caritas colleagues,
Dear guests and friends,

Today we invite you to come with us on a special journey.
To open your eyes and look at poverty,
To open your ears and listen to the voices of poor people,
To open your heart and meet people,
To open your mind and understand that we all are human persons.

The financial and economic crisis of today is aggravating the divide between poor people and those who are living in wealth; this is harmful to the society as a whole and to every single person. The Christian values and anthropology embraced by Caritas – based on a holistic vision of the human person, the importance of communities, solidarity, justice and peace – make us to refuse that still today so many people live in poverty because of unjust structures or unfair conditions. «Zero poverty» is our moral claim. Caritas is convinced that our societies need a new vision where human rights are fully respected and protected because of the recognised dignity of every human person who is the source and the end of all rights and obligations. We believe that every single person is an image of God.

Caritas in Europe wants to contribute to a new way to look at poverty. Poverty is more than a lack of material wellbeing. It affects the person in its body, its soul and its life. It affects the community where he or she lives. As a human community, we cannot let even a single person slide into the poverty spiral. We have to mend past inequities, avoid new injustices for the present and for future generations. This is what we call responsibility. This principle of responsibility informs our actions beyond their most immediate and material impact. Changes are possible. Caritas is a witness of changes in people who live in poverty and, still, succeed in crafting their lives and destinies. Through its work with poor people and through its advocacy efforts towards the public authorities, Caritas promotes sustainable living conditions for all by proposing concrete actions.

Working with poor and vulnerable people puts Caritas at the centre of the societal struggle between exclusion and inclusion. Inclusion is more than a key concept of the European Union. It is an obligation directly deriving from human rights. It can be seen as another way to build communion. Therefore, a process of active inclusion cannot be a unilateral burden assigned to those who are lacking resources or, vice-versa, to those who are providing resources. It is a shared task for the whole community, and one could even argue that those who are most capable have a greater duty in this

dynamic and reciprocal process. Enabling others to live to their full potential is to contribute to the full and true development of all persons and of the whole person (Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, 14; Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 11). Empowering the poor eventually means also empowering the whole community and the “City”.

Recognising the poor as equal human persons, who make the same contribution to building the «City» as all those who consider themselves free from poverty is to recognise that we all need one another. Poor people are not to be seen as victims, but rather as actors. Empowering the poor is the first step on the way to social inclusion. Social participation is the best way to fight against poverty, and the best way to prevent it.

(Recognition is both given and received. Recognition means gratitude, and Caritas is a place of gratitude. Many people in need express their gratitude to those who are able to help – albeit as professionals or as volunteers. This gratitude mirrors the real challenge of the “formation of the heart” (*Deus Caritas Est*, 31, a). Everything starts with «Deus caritas est» as our Pope Benedict XVI summarises. God is the source and the end of all human beings and of all our undertakings.)

Today, anti-poverty policies are still narrowly focused on assisting impoverished people. This approach is insufficient and must be turned into a preventative intervention during the early stages of life and in the transitions from one to another. This requires investment-oriented policies that avoid the “intergenerational transfer” of poverty: the best way of fighting poverty is to prevent it.

Bringing an end to poverty in the world and achieving the Millennium Development Goals as minimal targets is in everyone’s interest. The various current crises (the economic and financial one hitting the Western world, the global food crisis, the climate and energy crisis) are systemic crisis the reveal the dysfunction and unsustainability of the world’s model of economic development, and of the lifestyle of the wealthiest nations.

All these considerations orientate our advocacy work today. For 2010 and for the decade ahead (EU 2020), Caritas requests the European authorities to combat poverty consistently and to commit to securing integral human development (*Caritas in Veritate*, 67) in a new growth paradigm.

The paper presented today is the foundation of a series of specialised papers which will develop particular themes within the broader field of poverty. Together, those papers build a resource “library” for social workers, politicians, decision-makers and researchers. Each paper was elaborated by a group of experts and approved by the Social Policy Commission of Caritas Europa. Thanks to all those who have contributed within the task force, the various thematic groups, the commission and the secretariat general in Brussels to this result, which has received the valuable sponsorship of the European Commission under its program PROGRESS.

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May the Year 2010 be a renewed commitment to combating poverty in Europe and in the world. May «Zero poverty» become the claim of the whole «City»!

Erny Gillen

President of Caritas Europa