

Experiencing love in order to bring God's light into the world

Theological reflexions on the eve of the 18th General Assembly of Caritas Internationalis from 1 to 9 June 2007 in Rome.

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0. Introduction

At the request of the Secretary General of Caritas Internationalis, Duncan MacLaren, I have made a theological analysis of the ecclesial environment in the increasingly globalised world in which Caritas Internationalis must deploy its efforts in the years to come. Indeed, the General Assembly of 2007, the first under Benedict XVI, who inaugurated his pontificate with his programmatic Encyclical "Deus Caritas Est", will mark the beginning of a *personal and programmatic institutional renewal* of the Caritas Confederation in the world.

The aim of the present paper is merely to outline the topographies of the possible evolutions of Caritas Internationalis under the theme "Witnesses of Charity, Builders of Peace". The subject deliberately chosen by the governing bodies of Caritas Internationalis shows a Caritas Internationalis Confederation that fluctuates between humility and the ambition of its mission by choosing two biblical expressions that describe its action and its way of working: "witnesses" and "builders". In the two subjects, "witnesses" and "builders", the agent is effaced to the advantage of the actions envisaged: charity and peace. To fulfil this mission, Caritas organisations must show that their planning and organisation are competent and effective.

The next five sections will deal with the challenges presented by the Encyclical "Deus Caritas Est", the theme of the General Assembly "Witnesses of Charity, Builders of Peace" and the need for an active and proactive coordination of the universal mission of the Church in carrying out its diaconal mission.

1.0. Caritas, an "opus proprium" of the Church

With his Encyclical "Deus Caritas Est" the Supreme Pontiff places charity and "social" justice at the centre of his concerns for a living Church in a world in search of meaning and prosperity. "I wish to emphasize some basic elements, so as to call forth in the world renewed energy and commitment in the human response to God's love."¹ Benedict XVI leaves no doubt when he writes that, unlike action for justice in the world, charitable action is the "opus proprium" of the Church.

"The Church's charitable organisations, on the other hand, constitute an *opus proprium*, a task agreeable to her, in which she does not cooperate collaterally, but acts as a subject with direct responsibility, doing what corresponds to her nature. The Church can never be

¹ in Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est* of the Supreme Pontiff Benedict XVI, 1

exempted from practising charity as an organised activity of believers, and on the other hand, there will never be a situation where the charity of each individual Christian is unnecessary, because in addition to justice man needs, and will always need, love."²

Let us analyse in this first section the meaning of this definition for Caritas organisations at the diocesan, national and international levels—for the local churches, the Episcopal Conferences and the universal Church.

1.1. The meaning for Caritas organisations at the diocesan, national and international levels

It is obvious from the text of the Encyclical, and from any sensible theological reflection, that Caritas organisations are not—and cannot be—the sole, definitive or complete expression of the diaconal action of the Church. They are, however, qualified as the "first to be called" in the diaconal action of the Church. "The Church's charitable organisations, beginning with those of Caritas (at diocesan, national and international levels), ought to do everything in their power to provide the resources and above all the personnel needed for this work."³ This first line undoubtedly refers to the particular fact that the diocesan Caritas organisations are the immediate expression of the charitable action of the bishop and of the diocese. They are indeed established by the ecclesial authority and are the direct expression of the local churches. Very often, the vocation of the secretariats or offices of a diocesan Caritas organisation is to coordinate the social pastoral work of the local Church and, through their specific actions, to satisfy the needs that are not met by other social welfare actors of the Church. This flexibility and openness to emerging needs has often meant that the diocesan Caritas organisations are the first called and the best at responding to humanitarian crises.

In the desire to establish an efficient system, the Episcopal Conferences set up the national Caritas organisations with the same aim of coordinating charitable action at a national level and responding to unforeseeable crises.

In the same line of thought, Cardinal Montini, the future Pope Paul VI, favoured the creation of a Caritas Internationalis at a universal and global level. This initiative has now been crowned with success through an International Confederation of Caritas organisations, which has 162 members in 200 countries or territories. In the framework of globalisation and internationalisation of the many charitable initiatives of Catholic inspiration, Cor Unum was created in 1972 to bring together all these initiatives under the same roof with Caritas Internationalis. Though Cor Unum did not have a vocation of direct international action, Caritas Internationalis received the mandate to act worldwide as the Caritas of the Universal Church, the Caritas of the Supreme Pontiff. It is their structure and mission that led to the special mention of Caritas organisations in the Encyclical "Deus Caritas Est".

² in DCE cit. 29

³ in DCE cit. 31a

1.2. Promotion of the spirit of the Encyclical “Deus Caritas Est”

The Bishops, to whom Benedict XVI recalls the provisions of the Directory, are charged with ensuring the implementation and respect for the code of good conduct, which is also valid firstly for the local Caritas organisations that are the visible expression of the diaconal action of the local Church. "Recently, however, the *Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops* explored more specifically the duty of charity as a responsibility incumbent upon the whole Church and upon each Bishop in his Diocese, and it emphasised that the exercise of charity is an action of the Church as such, and that, like the ministry of Word and Sacrament, it too has been an essential part of her mission from the very beginning."⁴ Caritas Internationalis, sustained by the Holy See and the Pontifical Council Cor Unum, must in this context play the role of facilitator, promoter and accompanier of the dioceses. There is an urgent need to support the bishops and the dioceses in this spiritual, theological, organisational and practical work.

The promotion of a diocesan Caritas must go hand in hand with its integration in the social pastoral work of the diocese and of the Episcopal Conference. However, in addition to local and national distress, attention should be paid to all other cases of distress in the world. A withdrawal into oneself is not compatible with either the universal mission of the Church or with human poverty, which knows no borders.

"As our preceding reflections have made clear, the true subject of the various Catholic organisations that carry out a ministry of charity is the Church herself—at all levels, from the parishes, through the particular Churches, to the universal Church."⁵

1.3. The meaning for the universal Church

When Benedict XVI, the former Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, opened his pontificate, he placed emphasis on the *good practices of the faith*, among which diaconal action and the commitment to a fairer world play a fundamental role for the Church itself and in the world. There is an urgent need for the synodal action taken within Caritas Internationalis by Caritas organisations in the world to be recognised by the Holy See and to receive benevolent support from the Pontifical Council Cor Unum. What is now organised voluntarily and under the promotion of the local Churches could lead to the creation of a synod called by the Supreme Pontiff on the universal mission of the Catholic Church in its diaconal ministry.

One must avoid double and triple structures of coordination at the local, national and international levels. Furthermore, one must ensure a harmonious organisation between the diaconal action and the social commitment for justice in the world. These longstanding projects have just found in the Encyclical “Deus Caritas Est” paths to be taken not only at a local and national level but also at the level of the universal Church.

⁴ in DCE cit. 32

⁵ in DCE cit. 32

1.4. The ecumenical openness of charitable action

"Here I would clearly reaffirm what my great predecessor John Paul II wrote in his Encyclical *Sollicitudo rei socialis*,⁶ when he asserted the readiness of the Catholic Church to cooperate with the charitable agencies of these Churches and communities, since we all have the same fundamental motivation and look towards the same goal: a true humanism, which acknowledges that man is made in the image of God and wants to help him to live in a way consonant with that dignity."⁷

2.0. Caritas and the commitment to social justice

In his Encyclical "Deus Caritas Est", the Holy Father makes a systematic theological effort to place the two facets of his vision of a social Church—charitable work and social commitment for a fairer world—in relation and in interaction. Each facet, with its specificity and its particular historical background, must recognise its merits in the other, though this interdependence by no means cancels out the particular merits and specific means of action of each line of intervention.

2.1. The multiple faces of distress

In response to the multiple nature of distress, there is not, nor will there ever be, *an* intervention or a theory that will resolve the problems related to human suffering once and for all. Humans needs humans. No action, activity or intervention, however fair and appropriate, can ignore the personality of the intervener. In view of the human condition, the humanization of charitable action and of political and legal structures will continue to be a permanent task and effort. This is the hope of the poor and the threat to the rich.

2.2. Using the experience of the excluded in the fight for social justice

In order to avoid falling into theoretical speculations that are not in line with the specific reality, many women and men engaged in the charitable actions of the Church form part of the (diocesan) Justice and Peace commissions. Being side-by-side with those who experience moments of poverty and distress gives them a legitimacy and authenticity that are hard to match. This involvement of Caritas people in action and commitment to a fairer world through the Justice and Peace commissions should be completed at the national and international levels. Concerted actions involving Caritas Internationalis "Witnesses of Charity in the World" and the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace should allow the Church to better fulfil its role as a Builder of Peace.

⁶ Cf. n. 32; AAS 80 (1988), p. 556; La Documentation catholique 85 (1988), pp. 246-247

⁷ *in* DCE cit. 30b

2.3. For an integral social pastoral work

A true social pastoral work is the response of the Christian community that combines charitable action and social commitment to a fairer world. In addition to its direct aid, Caritas will initiate advocacy actions for the good of the people and communities affected by poverty. The social commitment to a fairer world will take shape through actions for and with those affected by situations of injustice. Thus, if within each dimension of social pastoral work there remain organisational tasks to be carried out, a major effort must be made to coordinate the two dimensions: charitable action and social commitment for justice.

3.0. “Witness of Charity, Builders of Peace”

3.1. Being supportive witnesses of God's love for humankind

At first sight, it seems rather strange that Caritas actors are only witnesses of charity. Are they not rather the agents and builders of charity in the Church and in the world? Of course! Caritas workers are far more than passive witnesses of charitable action. They participate in it and are well-trained and committed agents of it.

The proposal of being witnesses of charity, as the theme of our General Assembly, undoubtedly guides us towards other horizons. If we conceive love as an inexhaustible spring that transforms the world of things and relations in a bright world full of human warmth, the subject recalls to the builders of daily charity that they are not the holders or owners of this charity. God is love: “Deus Caritas Est”. He is the source of all charity. God is thus at the origin of all charitable actions that are performed in our world. “Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est.” In this sense, we are never the producers of love, or the simple consumers of a love that is directed towards us, but rather witnesses to a force that transcends us. Allowing oneself to be carried away by love is thus not to be confused with possessing any merit. Thus the Holy Father can sum up his thoughts on the personnel of every charitable organisation : “By their sharing in the Church's practice of love, they wish to be witnesses of God and of Christ, and they wish for this very reason freely to do good to all.”⁸

“No longer is it a question, then, of a ‘commandment’ imposed from without and calling for the impossible, but rather of a freely-bestowed experience of love from within, a love which by its very nature must then be shared with others. Love grows through love. Love is ‘divine’ because it comes from God and unites us to God; through this unifying process it makes us a ‘we’ which transcends our divisions and makes us one, until in the end God is ‘all in all’ (1 Cor 15: 28).”⁹

One must thus avoid stressing the merit of the agent. Being a witness of charity is a call for humility. It consists of a love that is always greater than that which one could attain through specific actions. And if all acts of love trace back to the origin, which is God, as workers of Caritas we become proactive and supportive witnesses of the love of God who reigns among us and may sometimes participate in our daily gestures.

⁸ in DCE cit. 33

⁹ in DCE cit. 18

“Only my readiness to encounter my neighbour and to show him love makes me sensitive to God as well. Only if I serve my neighbour can my eyes be opened to what God does for me and how much he loves me.”¹⁰

3.2. Peace is the result of justice transfigured by mercy

On first reading, the term “builder of peace” seems to be a Biblical expression that is not very common in our secularised languages, where the art of healing and the art of writing have been largely replaced by the technical skills of so-called modern medicine and by the imtemperate use of language to serve the fashions of technical manuals, flashy advertising or the production and reproduction of texts that are used more to entertain readers than to inspire them to reflect and to consider ideas more deeply. Like the witness, the builder is not a producer but rather one who helps to bring something into being. As a father and mother, together with a midwife, would give birth to a child, the builder participates in the coming into the world of an autonomous work that will subsequently make its own way.

(Social) peace is like a fruit that one must cultivate with great patience and love before picking it at just the right moment. Every farmer, every grower knows that the maturing of a fruit depends on many meteorological, climatic and environmental conditions. Peace is thus not a product but a *fruit* of a justice transfigured by the mercy of humans and of God.

Justice alone cannot be at the origin of well-being and peace. In his Encyclical “Deus Caritas Est” Pope Benedict XVI tries to find a delicate and fragile balance between actions for social commitment and charitable actions. If the establishment of justice is not impregnated with mercy, it gives rise to an oppressive burden that leads to new injustices. The motive of all justice must be the greatest justice. Openness towards the greatest justice brings us back to transcendence and humility. It is here that fervent and tacit love takes the form of the word and of prayer. The commitment to a fairer world always involves concepts and theories that are contingent and ephemeral. Whereas bitter ideologues will resign themselves to this de facto situation in continual evolution, the Person of God will go down in the history of human and Biblical hope. One must always recognise that humans are not at the service of justice, of rules and regulations—rather the rules, regulations and justice are at the service of humans. It is the mercy of God and of persons that is able to transfigure the instruments of justice into instruments of peace.

If one states today that without justice there will be no peace, one only expresses part of the truth. A purely formal justice without a soul may damage peace as much as anger and malice. A justice that loses sight of peace and mercy becomes blind and turns into a final justice. In the Christian vision of mankind, the last judgement is delivered by the Father to the Son of mankind who will reign forever.

¹⁰ *in DCE cit. 18*

3.3. Priority for humanitarian work and the fight against poverty. Adopting the “gaze of the heart”

In its strategic plan, Caritas Internationalis is charged with establishing priorities. This involves the priorities of the Confederation rather than the priorities of its members. Of course, the members participate in the mission of Caritas Internationalis, but they do not replace it as the transmitter of the will of all the Caritas organisations in the world. Each member must make tangible efforts to participate actively in carrying out the missions and goals of Caritas Internationalis. Neither nationalism, nor regionalism should take the lead in this strategic concertation that will determine the future of our Caritas Internationalis Confederation.

Giving the same visibility to all Caritas organisations, large or small, in the universal and global responses to natural and human-induced catastrophes is a precondition for the organisational development of Caritas Internationalis as a global actor on the humanitarian stage. Giving up nationalism and regionalism will be the key to building together an international organisation that is equal to the current challenges. In a Confederation such as Caritas Internationalis, all decisions and all actions are based on mutual trust and partnership. The members, together with the Holy See, form the Caritas Internationalis Confederation. And together with the Holy See, they can delegate part of their power to the Caritas Internationalis Confederation.

Despite the different dimensions of the advocacy work to be carried out worldwide, the Caritas Internationalis Confederation must show courage in adopting *one* federative priority that is recognisable and visible on a global level: the commitment to fight poverty. Despite many healings, Jesus has not become the first saint of the healers and doctors in the world. Despite the multiplication of loaves, Jesus has not become the master and first saint of all the bakers in the world. His interventions, his words and his miracles have served the Kingdom of God, who places all women and men in the centre. Because in the Kingdom of God there will be neither centre nor periphery, giving priority to the poor has become the distinctive sign of the life of Jesus and of Christians. By committing ourselves to fight all forms of dehumanising poverty, we become builders of peace.

Let us be guided by the “gaze of the heart” in adopting priorities for the Caritas Internationalis Confederation. This gaze will free us from all forms of egotism or prejudice. The “gaze of the heart” of the witnesses of charity and builders of peace of today and tomorrow will reconcile our prayers and our actions, our ambitions and our strategies. It is high time to organise the diaconal dimension of the Church at a universal level through subsidiarity and solidarity. May this 18th General Assembly of Caritas Internationalis become the world assembly of Caritas guided by the “gaze of the heart”.

4. For a theology of charity For a theology of charity that is the expression of work with the poor (witness of charity)

All true theology of charity ranges between the origins of Christian tradition (the Holy Scripture and the tradition of the Church) and the living experience of the history of Salvation in all times. Reading and rereading the Christian faith in the acts of charity that are performed each day in the whole world is a theological task and duty that should be

rediscovered and intensified at a universal level, i.e. at the level of the Caritas Internationalis Confederation. As mere technical actions, acts of charity are blind and dumb unless they are led by a work of reflection and understanding. As all actions are open to many meanings, Caritas must strive to give voice to the charitable meaning of its humanitarian action and social aid. This work of expression, of theology, is a work of development that should be carried out *within* practice rather than a theoretical exercise carried out *on* practice.

Involving the poor and social workers in the theological reflection will require theologians to make a new effort of authenticity and humility. If theologians visit the sites of charitable action these will become important places of learning and collaboration. It is on the ground that the theology of charity will take form and gain momentum.

As this theological work will necessarily be done at the parish, diocesan, national and international level, the Caritas Internationalis Confederation will have to play a role as a facilitator and universal recorder. Bringing spoken and evangelising testimonies from the grassroots to the international level would place Caritas Internationalis in the first ranks of bearing witness to charity in the world within the universal Church.

5. Caritas together with Justice and Peace

Head and tails, the two sides of a coin, provide a graphic image for understanding the interaction and interweaving of charitable acts and advocacy work in defence of social justice in the world. Pope Benedict XVI insists in his Encyclical “Deus Caritas Est” that the two functions must be distinguished; the internal organisation of the Roman Church establishes this distinction between the functions of Caritas Internationalis and the Pontifical Council Cor Unum on the one hand, and the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace on the other hand. Caritas Internationalis—together with its member organisations and supported by the Pontifical Council Cor Unum—is undoubtedly the strong arm of the Church for carrying out its diaconal mission. However, in the last few mandates, Caritas has begun to integrate the dimension of advocacy in its strategic action. Indeed, the confrontation with the suffering of those affected by poverty requires not only a specific response of aid but also interventions to denounce unfair structures that are often the cause of human suffering. This option of commitment to international advocacy brings Caritas Internationalis closer to the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, and the ideal connection deserves a reflection at an organisational level.

Caritas Internationalis and the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace indeed carry out work that is largely complementary, with increasing points of convergence. If the works of the Pontifical Council can nourish the reflection of Caritas Internationalis, the past experiences of Caritas Internationalis can in turn nourish the reflections of the Pontifical Council. A structured cooperation seems appropriate in order to take advantage of all the possible synergies. Such concerted actions will benefit the Church as a whole.

6. Conclusion

The gaze of the heart which inspires those who work in favour of a fairer and more humane world reveals the people who dare to open their eyes to the realities of a world that is still in evolution. Confronted with so many impressions, questions and answers, believers will find their equilibrium in exposing themselves to the gaze of Christ.

"At such times, a living relationship with Christ is decisive if we are to keep on the right path, without falling into an arrogant contempt for man, something not only unconstructive but actually destructive, or surrendering to a resignation which would prevent us from being guided by love in the service of others. Prayer, as a means of drawing ever new strength from Christ, is concretely and urgently needed. People who pray are not wasting their time, even though the situation appears desperate and seems to call for action alone. Piety does not undermine the struggle against the poverty of our neighbours, however extreme. In the example of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta we have a clear illustration of the fact that time devoted to God in prayer not only does not detract from effective and loving service to our neighbour but is in fact the inexhaustible source of that service."¹¹

Luxembourg, 18 January 2007

¹¹ *in DCE. cit. 36*