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Caritas Internationalis Homily

1 Cor 13: 1-8, 13; John 15:9-11

St. Peter's Basilica, 11 May 2023

The Holy Father's address, which is already online,¹ is an extraordinary meditation on the mission and mystery of Caritas. I won't read it to you, but present the main points more briefly, so we can live it deeply and assimilate it gratefully, in light of our beautiful readings.

After the horrors of the Second World War, Venerable Pius XII wanted to show the church's compassion for all in the world. In 1951, he encouraged the foundation of a federation that would support, coordinate, and increase collaborations among Catholic charitable organizations. In 2004, St John Paul II highlighted the bond that exists between Caritas Internationalis and the church's pastors by recalling the source of love for the church, which is Jesus Christ.

And it is in the Eucharist, food and drink that sustains us on the journey, which we will soon receive together, my brothers and sisters, where we see Christ's great love expressed for each of us today.

In the presence of that great mystery, how can we possibly respond? We may even feel overwhelmed by that invitation, loving though it is. One way to reciprocate God's love for us is by being a sign of that love for others, by making ourselves a gift for others, in humble service. By, as Paul says elsewhere, pouring ourselves out, like a "libation."² There is no better way of showing that we understand the mystery of the Eucharist.

But as Caritas, in making that loving and generous gift, you must remind yourself, as the Holy Father says, of the mission that you have received from the church itself. Indeed, what distinguishes Caritas from other ecclesial groups is that it assists and supports Bishops in their own pastoral exercise of caritas in their dioceses. In this spirit, you are working on partnership and fraternal cooperation as fundamental pillars of the Catholic identity of Caritas.

It is a difficult path, to be sure, but surely worth taking—with one another, in love for the poor, and in union with the Church.

Of course, here in St. Peter's Basilica that connection become obvious, beautifully! Above me read the great words "Tu es Petrus," incised in marble. We gather, through the Holy Spirit, in

¹ <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2023/may/documents/20230511-caritas-internationalis.html>

² 2 Timothy 4:6.

union with Peter, in union with the Bishop of Rome and with all Bishops ... not out of routine or obligation, but in love for those the Church sends us to.

Caritas, as St. Paul wrote, is the most “sublime” way to know God and to understand the Christian faith. In his famous “Hymn to Love,” which we just read, he notes that even the most generous service means nothing without that virtue. So, it would be easy to fall: to mis-understand the most heroic service or *diakonia*, get caught up in pragmatic activism, favour narrow interests and sacrifice union ... because of losing sight of true caritas, losing sight of our confession of faith in God the Father, losing focus and identity.

We would even lose sight of ourselves! For love, is what makes us “to be.” When we embrace God’s love, and love as God loves, and remain *in* God’s love (as Jesus says in John’s Gospel today), we understand the meaning of our own lives: we find life only when we give it away; we find our own life important, when we recognize how totally precious is the life of every other. Love opens our eyes, and enables us to recognize that the neighbour in need of caritas is my sibling with a name, a story, a drama, unique and never to be duplicated. Yes, our sibling neighbour’s needs question us, disturb us, and challenge us to respond. As they should! For this is Christ questioning, disturbing, and challenging us. And God’s love gives us the strength to respond.

Do you want to know if a Christian is living caritas? – for example, yourself? First, look closely to see if they do it joyfully! For caritas is patient, St Paul says, and relying on God’s love gives us the ability and strength to work patiently. Knowing God is with us, “remaining with him, there is no place for discouragement. And there is no need to get disturbed as we “make space” even for those with whom we disagree.

Love enables us, as ministers of the Gospel and of the Church, to do so much more. It helps to remove vanity and a desire to put ourselves above others. Love promotes the good of the other. It doesn’t gossip about whatever evil others may have done. Love forgives and excuses every offense, so that we let the Father’s love embrace us. Love “keeps no records of wrongdoings,” Paul criticizes the wrong kind of bookkeeping!

Every organization, even an ecclesial federation, has times of conflict and struggle. That’s when it’s hard not to keep track of wrongdoings. Listen to the gentle invitation – to encounter, to gather, to forgive, to unite, as you have been struggling to do these last 5½ months. All this rooted and grounded in love, in the caritas which is your name and mission and mystery.

Faith and hope are provisional gifts, Paul tells us, given to help our pilgrim life on earth. Love is forever, here and hereafter, and so Jesus tells us this is where we must “remain.”

Caritas International was envisioned, over 70 years ago, to express the love that comes from the heart of the Church. So from the Church flows the service Caritas offers especially to the neediest.

Your task, the Holy Father said, is threefold.

First, to proclaim the Gospel with good works. Yes, promote important projects and implement effective strategies; yes, seek your personal holiness and the holiness of those you serve; and yes, embrace ecclesial and missionary conversion, synodality it's now called, flowing from the heart of the Church. From the majestic *Tu es Petrus* flow your commitment and your walking together and your service.

Second, your task is to exercise the commitment to *caritas* of your local Church. Help your pastors to be clear and prophetic. Help the lay people carry the Church's message of love into the political, social and cultural realms.

Third, your third task is unity. *Caritas Internationalis* embraces many identities and therefore many riches. Compete in showing esteem for one another and let conflict lead you not to division but to growth!

Love, love, love. Your name, *Caritas*, is beautiful, meaningful, demanding. Continue to be the Church's *caritas* for all our siblings, everywhere, always.