

Antecedents to the 2023 General Assembly

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Everyone here knows that the Holy Father took drastic steps last November to address shortcomings in the operations of the General Secretariat. I am sure that all of you were surprised and disturbed by this. I am also sure that you want me to address what happened. You need reassurance that the changes were required and appropriate. If I fail to provide that reassurance, you will find it difficult to carry out your responsibilities in this Assembly in the needed positive frame of mind.

So, in the next 20 minutes, I will try to explain the situation as well as I can. At the end of my explanation, I trust that some of you – I hope, many of you! – will be fully satisfied because I have laid all your concerns to rest; I hope that anyone who is still unsatisfied will dialogue with those who are at peace.

Here is my first point: let me say what the intervention was NOT. It was not an examination of CI in general. It was not to question the admirable and necessary achievements of CI or of any of its member Caritas's. I trust that this is perfectly clear. For a very long time, I have known the immense value of Caritas. It became especially striking while I was in my former role in the Migrants and Refugees Section. Here is one example. During the Covid-19 pandemic we created a clearinghouse of information on local initiatives to assist all manner of persons whose situation had become desperate. For example, many migrant workers, whose work suddenly ended, lacked the resources to return home, and anyway the borders were closed. Local Caritas's, often supported by other members elsewhere, were very active in arranging accommodation, services, and the wherewithal for survival. We published Bulletins full of stories of such excellent local work.

You can provide other examples that illustrate my first point: the appointment of a Temporary Administrator of the General Secretariat and governance bodies last November were never a criticism of the good work throughout the Confederation.

My second point is about what triggered the process. Quite simply, some people working in the General Secretariat complained about workplace problems. How many, what was said exactly and by whom ... these are details that I need to keep confidential. And in fact, the details do not matter, because the complaints did not lead directly to any changes. Rather, they were the reason for undertaking a systematic investigation. Here I ask you to agree that the exceptional good work of Caritas doesn't justify or excuse serious shortcomings in how the General Secretariat goes about its daily chores or how it treats the staff.

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This raises my third point. The problems could not be reduced to a few isolated complaints. This was verified in an investigation that was exhaustive in terms of the number and range of interviews. No one was ignored who wished to speak. And the inquiry did not harbour a hidden agenda or a predetermined outcome. Indeed, if it had shown that the initial complaints represented the dissatisfaction of just a few employees, the next steps would have been entirely different.

Fourth point: as you know from the statements of last November, the findings revealed patterns of workplace relationships and processes that prevented the General Secretariat from operating properly; furthermore, they undermined the wellbeing of staff. They put the operations, name and reputation at risk, not only of Caritas Internationalis but of all Caritas's. Accordingly, having considered the evaluation's findings, the Pope made leadership changes; he also commissioned a revision of the statutes so that new norms and practices would better enable the Confederation's competent bodies to detect and solve future problems. Work commenced immediately; healing began, statutes have been revised, the Secretariat was able to prepare this Assembly, and CI is poised to function and serve better in the future.

Please accept these 4 points – not a critique of everything; serious complaints demanded attention; a competent investigation uncovered patterns of shortcomings; these represented clear and real dangers which required a vigorous response. Still, the changes ordered by the Pope were drastic for persons whom you had come to know and appreciate. Moreover, he intervened at a delicate moment: Caritas was in the midst of a convention to celebrate fraternal cooperation; no one was thinking about drastic changes.

With this, I hope that some or even all of your concerns have been addressed. Yet you might still feel sad, disappointed, or bitter. I understand that, and sympathize deeply.

I want to address your very understandable feelings. To do so, I have made up a little story, a sort of parable. It is about someone named Cari Inter. Of course, this awkward name stands for Caritas Internationalis. Please bear with me as I unpack the situation in terms of personal, human relationships.

Cari Inter is a dear dear friend of yours. One day you hear that Cari felt very ill and saw some doctors. Of course, you are anxious to know what's the matter. You ask around, but you cannot really expect the doctors to share the full, detailed diagnosis because they must respect norms of confidentiality. Such provisions protect Cari's right to privacy. So, you accept the limited information you are given, even though this frustrates and worries you.

Next, you hear that a difficult and painful course of treatment has been prescribed, and it must begin immediately. This shocks you because you don't like to hear that your dear friend's health is in such peril. Also, you are heartbroken that the course of treatment will cause your friend to suffer. Thinking "It's better to take more time, not to rush, and to be gentler!" you are tempted to react with a desperate plea for delay. Or you want to plea for less or lighter treatment – anything that would be easier for your friend to bear.

But really, you recognize that these thoughts just reflect your love and concern; you don't have a reason to mistrust the doctors, and in fact, Cari's health depends on faithfully carrying out the treatment the treatment they prescribe in light of their findings. For the doctors not to act decisively and vigorously, would be a dereliction of responsibility.

Now let me connect the doctors to my earlier points. First, the doctors accept that your friend Cari Inter is an exceptional person; you are quite right to admire and love Cari. Second, the doctors did not act upon a rumour or just a few symptoms or a rushed examination. Instead, thirdly, they conducted a thorough diagnosis. Fourth, that examination resulted in solid findings, and the prescribed treatment promises to restore Cari to good health and to prevent future reoccurrences. So, all of Cari's friends should be grateful for this regime, painful as it undoubtedly will be.

And now a final point: When and how is it best for Cari's dear friends to get the news. One way would have been with a message to each *Caritas* and a press conference. Thinking it would be better (even if not necessarily less painful) when a good number of Cari's dear friends were together, Cardinal Tagle and I made the announcement at the Conference in Rome on 22 November. If it would have been less shocking via e-mail and the press, I am really sorry for your additional distress and suffering.

Summing up the message of the parable: the appointment of a Temporary Administrator was an act of love and care, not a denunciation, because *Caritas* is close to the heart of the Pope, of the Church, of the Dicastery for Integral Human Development. It was a necessary call to repair and fine-tune a body that is essential for the whole Church.

And please don't think that the parable will go on and on. Instead, it has a happy ending. Very soon after this General Assembly, the Temporary Administration, that began in late November, comes to an end, and you will once again have the leadership as elected and appointed according to your Statutes.

Now the work is in your hands. When *Praedicate Evangelium* says that the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development (DPIHD) "is competent with regard to *Caritas Internationalis* ..., according to [its] statutes" (PE Art 174 § 2),² we understand this to mean offering guidance when requested and intervening to prevent harm when needed. The Statutes clearly establish that articulating CI's mission, choosing priorities, selecting ways and means to achieve results, evaluating results and correcting any shortcomings, are all entirely up to you.

We rejoice in and give thanks for the services of *Caritas* – charity, relief, development, justice – which our faith and our Church ask of us. These comprise the spirituality and praxis of the Good Samaritan. The Dicastery for Integral Human Development is happy to have the mandate of accompanying *Caritas Internationalis*.

² The DPIHD "exercises the responsibilities reserved by law to the Holy See in establishing and supervising international charitable associations and funds created for the same purposes, in accordance with the provisions of the respective statutes and in compliance with current legislation" (PE, Art 174 § 3).

To go forward as one body with many members worldwide is, of course, inherently difficult. There will be moments when it functions awkwardly, and when the efforts appear costly and ineffective. Please be patient. This is the way families live and grow, even when they are together and especially when they are scattered. Families are based on relationships of mutual care and love, but they are also where tension and sadness can be expressed. CI is a large family with a wealth of potential that is born of faith and differences. There is room for improvement – this will always be the case among real humans in the real world – and everyone wants this Caritas family to prosper and grow, as Jesus said, into “the greatest of shrubs, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches” (Mt 13:33)

Your Confederation, in its variety, mirrors the Church at a smaller scale: a scattered, worldwide *koinonia* or community, existing nearly everywhere, characterised by a participatory model of relations and shared governance. Indeed, the seeds of synodality are to be found in the DNA of CI.

For CI to properly serve its mission, that is, to carry out its statutory functions more adequately, it was necessary to revise the current regulatory framework. We thank God for the new Statutes. However, Statutes and procedures are merely words. They cannot achieve anything without the skills and dedication of you, the men and women of Caritas. Please dedicate your best energies and resources to carrying out these statutory functions and also to the governance of this irreplaceable Confederation. As Pope Francis constantly urges us, remember to pray to the Lord for guidance and strength. I am certain that the Holy Spirit will guide your discernment and enlighten your choices.

Before closing, I want to thank the Temporary Administration for its work; I hope that the DSSUI adequately supported its efforts. It was a tough job, and time was very short. So, too, we all remain grateful to the former leadership for their contribution, especially in paving the way for making CI a more fraternal network with the international and regional levels better integrated, and with Caritas’s from different nations learning how to collaborate better in a shared mission to serve humanity. Changing for the future doesn’t mean denying the achievements of the past.

From this moment forward, let’s follow the example the “good and faithful servant” (Mt 25:23) who knows how to use goods intelligently and avoids any suggestions or temptations that would be contrary to *caritas*, as St Paul says: *Caritas Christi urget nos* (2 Cor 5:14). May you work together, guided by the compass of God’s word and valuing your multiple capacities. May all the paths you follow promote reconciliation, leaving behind past divisions and tensions rifts that rob you of the joy of the Gospel, *Evangelii Gaudium*. May you together lay out the best itineraries, in order to continue serving as the “loving” face and arm of the Church, and may faith, hope and love flood you and permeate your service.

Finally, may the Lord abundantly bless your endeavours during the coming days of the General Assembly.