



CI President's address to the Holy Father

Most Holy Father,

If I were allowed to make only two statements today, I would say to you on behalf of the Caritas Internationalis Confederation:

- Together, as a Church, in the service of the poorest, and
- everyone should be able to share in creation,

because the roots of our Faith lie in the creation of men and women in the image and likeness of God,

because only the human person is sacred on this earth, and

because exclusion, poverty and marginalisation are outrageous.

Most Holy Father,

The participants at the 18th General Assembly of Caritas Internationalis have gathered together at the Vatican with the theme of “Witnesses of Charity, Builders of Peace”. We are a confederation of hands-on organisations, actors in the field, whom you know well, engaged in the socio-pastoral ministry of our Churches. We are tillers of the soil and workers, animated by the spirit of the Gospel and guided by the Church's social teaching.

Our work during this week in Rome has been based on documentary resources written by you and your predecessors:

- Firstly, the encyclical, *Populorum progressio*, an essential text for everyone with its appeal for development of the whole person.
- Then the chirograph of September 2004, which describes Caritas Internationalis as promoting collaboration among its members to carry out tasks of animation, coordination and representation, and grants it public canonical legal personality whilst hoping that it may strengthen its bonds with the Universal Church.
- Finally, in paragraph 16 of your encyclical, *Deus Caritas est*, you give a source of hope to all seekers of God when you write, “love of neighbour is a path that leads to the encounter with God”.

Our General Assembly has been working on its priorities for the next four years:

- Intervention in emergency situations whilst ensuring respect for the dignity of persons.
- Promotion of integral human development in the various aspects of people's lives – economic, social, political and cultural – whilst the spiritual and ethical dimension places them within an integral approach.
- Contributing to the restoration of lasting peace. Caritas has many paths for participating in peace:
 - o Advocacy – concerted action to bring about structural changes.

- Strengthening of skills.
- Formation of a strong network of committed peace builders. This aspect is particularly important as the occupation of Palestine clocks up forty years this week and many of our members are engaged in processes of reconciliation in, for example, Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda and Sri Lanka. Others are involved in promoting education programmes, enhancement of the status of women and agricultural and social programmes in Afghanistan.
- Finally, adaptation of the structures, processes and resources of Caritas Internationalis, including development of links with the Holy See, with Cor Unum who “follow and accompany us”, and more widely with the dicasteries as a whole, mentioning in particular the Secretariat of State.

Caritas Internationalis thereby continues its actions in the long term.

This was the case when the 1987 General Assembly recognised AIDS as a priority. Actions undertaken encouraged the training of clergy, religious and lay people to provide care for the sick, to prevent the spread of the disease and to promote the values of the Church’s social teaching. The Confederation and its members are engaged in advocacy so that politicians and legislations include access to treatment for everyone and eliminate discrimination. When you spoke in November 2005, Most Holy Father, on the eve of World AIDS Day, you heartened us by saying: “Therefore I encourage the many initiatives promoted, especially by ecclesial communities, to eradicate this sickness, and I feel close to AIDS sufferers and their families, invoking upon them the help and comfort of the Lord.”

More recently, and in other fields, your positions have been points of support and reference, and incentives for our work of charity, solidarity and justice carried out by a global pluralistic network of volunteers and employees united in the Church.

Indeed, this week you appealed to members of the G8 meeting in Germany to continue debt cancellation policies. Your insistence on Africa – especially on Darfur where we are collaborating with Protestant Churches to conduct an enormous humanitarian programme – is in tune with our concerns and commitments. The global issue of financing development is crucial, although too many countries do not yet keep their word, and corruption goes against the principles of the Church’s social teaching. His Excellency Cardinal Renato Martino, in a note following an international conference on the fight against corruption organised by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace in June 2006, wrote: “On the international level, the fight against corruption requires that people work together to increase transparency in economic and financial transactions and to enact within different countries uniform legislation in this area”. He concluded: “Episcopal Conferences of many countries, have made interventions against corruption and on behalf of a society that is governed by law. Local Churches should cooperate in a valuable manner with international organisations in the fight against corruption.”

This appeal for responsibility may also be found in your first encyclical in which you write that Catholic humanitarian aid and development organisations should be professional, independent of parties and ideologies and should not engage in proselytism. In paragraph 20 you also say that “Love thus needs to be organised if it is to be an ordered service to the community”.

Caritas Internationalis thus needs a strategic framework – one of the objectives of the work carried out at this General Assembly – and a vision – “Witnesses of Charity, Builders of Peace – in order to measure up to what people and the Church expect from it as a global confederation, an instrument of the Church in the service of near and distant neighbours and of their promotion, the next objective of love for charity and the next theme of law for justice.

Denis Viénot
10 May 2007